



From Poe to Cortázar: Spheres of Influence and Circles

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Abstract: A close examination of Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka* and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Circles*, "From Poe to Cortázar: Spheres of Influence and Circles" provides a comparison and contrast of these texts and authors, as well as an exploration of the influence they provided to Argentinean writer, Julio Cortázar, in his short story *Axolotl*.

Julio Cortázar, born in Brussels of Argentinean parents, is considered by most of the Spanish-speaking world as the writer of his generation. During his formative years, he found literary inspiration in the fantastical works of Poe, Wells, and Verne. By the time Cortázar received his degree in secondary education and began working in Buenos Aires, he discovered Jean Cocteau's *Opium*, which he attributed to his fascination with surrealist aesthetics. Among the many works by the writer, "Axolotl" first published in *Final del Juego* in 1956,¹ holds a strange effect in the reader for the way in which the human and the animal are not seen as different species, but as beings that share from a consciousness pool whose walls are so fragile any sincere level of empathy from one of the participants accompanied with a fascination stare can subvert the order of their reality. Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka*, a work regarded as one of the most unusual and ambitious contributions to the confluence of literature, philosophy, and science in the nineteenth century, births such effect by Cortázar. In his work, Poe suggested he finally unmasked the inner workings and plan of God (Olson 31). Closely following in its footsteps—at least ideologically—"Axolotl" allows for multiple analysis tending to literature and philosophy, who antecede two nuanced characteristic trends of Poe's major cosmological contention made in *Eureka*: that of the cyclical nature of existence in a circumscribed (yet infinite) space exemplified by, as he calls it, "The Universe of Stars" as well as the transmigration of consciousness.

Poe wrote: "My general proposition, then, is this: —In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things" (8). For the author, the intrinsic nature of existence is related directly to an "original" creator. Yet, the meaning behind *Eureka* is not strictly cosmological, for he was not a full-fledged scientist, but cannot be considered a cosmic dilettante, either. Poe's literary work on the cosmos has received the most orthodox interpretations and harsh critiques for claims based on assumptions with no "expertise." T. S. Eliot, for example, wrote, "Eureka makes no deep impression . . . because we are aware of Poe's lack of qualification in philosophy, theology or natural science" (Eliot 41). In a letter written

¹ First edition printed in Mexico in which only nine of the 18 short stories that made it to the 1964 edition (from which all subsequent editions are based from) are included.

to George W. Eveleth, with whom Poe had corresponded since 1845, Poe summarizes the general cosmological propositions of *Eureka* in a condensed list of seven points, all of which explore a universal manifestation “of all things to return to their original unity”—a theme that is consistent throughout his work. It comes as no surprise, then, that Eliot’s critique would touch on Poe’s shortage of “expertise” in such disciplines since his take on New Criticism dictated Poe to “...be judged by the standards of the past” (Eliot 45), thus his previous, accountable experience.

An adaptation from a lecture called “The Universe” delivered at the Society Library in New York on 3 February 1848, *Eureka* is Poe’s largest nonfictional work (The Poe Encyclopedia 120) and by far the most intricate and personal. “I design” Poe writes, “to speak of the *Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical—of the Material and Spiritual Universe: —of its Essence, its Origins, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny*” (8). Elizabeth Vincelette argues that *Eureka* is an example of what M. H. Abrams coins as “natural supernaturalism,” an alteration of religion by fragmenting the spiritual into “secularization of theology” (37). While Poe navigates through his work, he sets forth the concept of infinity as an example of the limitations of the human consciousness. This can be illustrated by Blaise Pascal, to whom Poe attributes and from whom he cites a definition that attempts to conceptualize the infinity of the universe by stating “It is a sphere,’ he says, ‘of which the centre is everywhere, the circumference, nowhere” (28). This definition is, in turn, used in *Eureka* to demonstrate the difficulty in attempting to imagine infinity/God; a notion that Poe himself has trouble attaining.

The concept of original unity, Poe contends in the following fragment of a letter to George W. Eveleth on 29 February 1848, gives reason for the outward expansion of the universe, as well as the empirical evidence he needs to re-imagine the monotheistic traditional religious argument that the universe was conceived by a Creator, i.e. God. “What I have propounded [*in Eureka*] will (in good time) revolutionize the world of Physical & Metaphysical Science.” Although many contemporary critics of Edgar A. Poe were not only skeptical but greatly opposed to the views set forth in *Eureka*, what Poe stated can be translated into two things. On the one hand, Poe shows great optimism on his resolution at fulfilling the work of a lifetime, one filled with predictions on the “how” the universe was created while asserting the “who” with a mixture of logic and faith. On the other, he discloses a deeper investigative thought process that led him acquire enough information to form a book of precise conjectures about cosmology that he knew would change the way people regard the origins of all matter in the cosmos.

But anteceding Pascal, Giordano Bruno provided a similar approach, “We can assert with certainty that the universe is all center, of that the center of the universe is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.” Giordano Bruno is believed to have borrowed this notion from Alain de Lille, a twelfth-century theologian who, in turn, borrowed the idea from the *Corpus Hermeticum*: “God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” All metaphors incorporate, not only the same basic elements, but the exact same idea. So, what does it mean?

We know that Poe is particularly inclined to the use of metaphors in *Eureka* simply by paying attention to the subtitle of his work, “a prose poem” and his insistence on wishing that his work be judged *only* for its poetic attributes rather than the content. Yet, what Poe tries to instill with such a statement is a balance between the sublime imagery and intensity of the ideas proposed, as well as the feasibility and strength of the ideas themselves. This projection of his work is the perfect example of his main discussion throughout *Eureka*: a merge among binaries in which chaos and beauty, logic and reason, life and death, the physical and the spiritual, are not dichotomies but agreements of similarity, sameness, and unity.

From Spheres to Circles

Poe was not the only North American writer in the nineteenth century to be fascinated by circumferences. Becoming in his lifetime the most famous writer in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson dedicated an essay, "Circles", to the geometric figure and its symbolisms as part of *Essays: First Series* published in 1841. Widely recognized as a transcendentalist in his philosophy for works like *Nature*, in which he describes nature as a buffer zone between the physical and the spiritual plane, Emerson tackles similar encounters as those of Poe in reference of how God is represented, "St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere" (45). Very similar quote to those ascribed to Bruno, de Lille, Von Humboldt, Pascal, and perhaps many more, it holds a similar attempt to explain the nature of being.

Yet, one of the main differences between the two works is how "Circles" is not concerned much with the future of the universe, as *Eureka* is, but rather with its past and present condition. Emerson brings into attention the inability of the physical to atemporal longevity by stating, "Permanence is but a word of degrees" (149), which is referential to his theory of spirits which he exemplifies by means of a metaphor involving steps on a ladder,² "step by step we scale this mysterious ladder; the steps are actions, the new prospect is power" (151). As the spirit (progress) advances upward, it is faced with skepticism (tradition/society/fear) in order to reach the "revelation of the new hour."

Rather than conceiving the limitations of the human mind on the comprehension of the universe that surrounds it, Emerson argues that the absolute limit of observation can always be redefined in a concern with movement towards constant expansion of space, being, and consciousness since it "depends on the force or truth of the individual soul" (150). If that which is considered as soul is too big to be contained within the circles that are described as "self-evolving" those circles burst (thanks to this capacity) and, in that expansion create a new circle of bigger circumference, alluding to the mind/soul's malleability and expandability. "There are no fixtures in nature," he claims, "The universe is fluid and volatile" (149). The distinction among the universe and the self is immanent in composition since his philosophy denounces division among the physical and the spiritual world; it follows the belief that the universe is but a physical manifestation of God, the outcome of God being permeated and imbued on all things.

Spheres and Labyrinths

Jorge Luis Borges, a pioneer of twentieth-century Latin American Literature who was greatly influenced by Poe's work which originated the Detective Novel genre, and his fantastical and philosophical literature, discusses in "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal" (contained within *Labyrinths*) an idea which he proposes at the very beginning of the paper by stating, "It may be that the universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors" (168). In other words, it would only be required a few metaphors to attain knowledge of all history. While the statement might

² A reference to Sulam Yaakov (Jacob's Ladder) mentioned in the Book of Genesis. It appears in Jacob's dream as he takes rest from his travel to Haran. The ladder's feet rested on earth and the top on heaven. (Genesis 28: 10-12). It is also a reference used in Freemasonry, with the first three steps representing faith, hope, and charity (the main principles of Freemasonry) as the "tools" with which a soul returns to God; the seven steps of the ladder also represent the "Copernican" planets: The Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

seem paradoxical, Borges exemplifies his claims by following not a handful of metaphors, but one metaphor that has been recycled by many thinkers over the span of millennia,

Six centuries before the Christian era Xenophanes of Colophon, the rhapsodist, weary of the Homeric verses he recited from city to city, attacked the poets who attributed anthropomorphic traits to the gods; the substitute he proposed to the Greeks was a single God: an eternal sphere. In Plato's *Timaeus* we read that the sphere is the most perfect and most uniform shape, because all points in its surface are equidistant from the center (Borges 169).

We come to realize, thanks to this study of "a handful of metaphors" that Poe's approach concerning the perfection of God/infinity has been ascribed to a specific geometric figure whose physical attributes allow for it to represent two ideas which Poe merges into one: the creation and "distribution" of the universe, and God. Poe expresses in his cosmology, a definition closely knitted with what has been discussed in Borges' writing,

I am fully warranted in announcing that *the Law which we have been in the habit of calling Gravity exists on account of Matter's having been irradiated, at its origin, atomically, into a limited sphere of Space, from one... absolute Particle Proper, by the sole process in which it was possible to satisfy, at the same time, the two conditions, irradiation, and generally-equable distribution throughout the sphere* (Poe 67).

Poe's notions of Newtonian gravity in which matter was dispersed into a "sphere of Space" from an absolute origin and attained a "generally-equable distribution" can be traced back all the way to the late 6th century BCE. This timeline of metaphors serves as a perfect example of the mindset Poe proposes in his cosmological work, that of distribution through time and space with an "originator" at the center which "irradiates" ideas. The concepts that Poe brings forward in *Eureka* like irradiation from a point of origin, generally-equable distribution, or a tendency of all matter to return to its point of origin, serve as examples of how the cosmos has been theorized by looking on the self for answers. These theories represent a projection of the mind of Poe and the general ideological framework seen reflected on those influenced by his body of work.

Poe and Emerson in Cortázar's *Axolotl*

More recent scholars have studied *Eureka* with a much broader perception on the author's intentions, taking into account the wide net he has cast all across the world in terms of influence for later writers. In an interview for the Spanish television program "A Fondo," Cortázar mentions considering the commission of his translation of the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe as his most enjoyable task as a writer since it represented an opportunity for an in-depth approach with the works of an author as influential as Poe. The task was commissioned by The University of Puerto Rico's Ricardo Ayala. At that time, Cortázar moved from France to Italy, presumably to better manage his economic hardships and complete the task.

"Axolotl" tells the story of an anonymous narrator with an increasing fascination for the species of salamander to which he attributes human-like traits, to the point of trading his body for that of the creature he stared for so long at *Jardin de Plantes*. Being told in a first-person perspective, the story allows room for interpretation and affords a constant stream-of-consciousness account in which the terms by which the story is to be interpreted are

left ambiguous. A blurry line between the real and the fantastical in Cortázar's short stories allow for such an analysis. The following excerpt from "Algunos aspectos del cuento" is the author's definition of what he claims has been wrongly labeled *literatura fantástica* [fantastic literature] in which he denounces the unreliability of realism as an artistic movement and literary genre,

Almost all the tales that I have written belong to the 'fantastical' genre, for lack of a better name, and they oppose that fake realism that consists of believing that all things can be described and explained just as the philosophic and scientific optimisms of the eighteenth century took for granted. That is to say, inside of a world ruled more-or-less by a system of laws, principles, relations from cause to effect, defined psychologies, and well-mapped geographies. In my case, the suspicion of a more secretive and less communicative order, as well as the prolific discovery of Alfred Jarry, for whom the true study of reality did not reside in the laws but rather in the exceptions of such laws, have been some of the principles that guided my personal pursuit of a literature irrespective of an all-too-ingenuous realism (my trans., 3-4).

The argument made against "fake realism" is very romantic in nature. Nonetheless, Cortázar's description of the axolotl shows a level of detail consistent with the Pre-Raphaelite tradition on photorealism of the mundane and the quotidian while, at the same time, it retraces the limitations as the norms of what "everyday" is gets challenged. His description of the axolotl's fingernails and eyes is the best example. 'Pero lo que me obsesionó fueron las patas, de una finura sutilísima, acabadas en menudos dedos, en uñas minuciosamente humanas' "But the thing that I obsessed about was their feet, of a quite subtle finesse, ending in small fingers; carefully-crafted human fingernails" (my trans.; 163). The description itself is not at play here, but rather the imagery presented in order to describe.

To begin the short story with the ending was not an act of foreshadowing for Cortázar, by any means, but rather an early statement at the cyclical thematic constitution of his tale. 'Ahora soy un Axolotl' "I now am an Axolotl" (my trans.; 161) describes nothing but the result of a story that is yet to unfold. It is also referential of Emerson's transcendental focus to past and present mentioned previously, since the story is told through two temporal perspectives: past and present. The flaneur narrator follows this adjudging statement by describing the route from which he strolled in order to get to *Jardin des Plantes*, where he mesmerized his psyche with the sight of the axolotls. 'Bajé por el bulevar de Port Royal, tomé St. Marcel y L'Hôpital... En la biblioteca Saint-Geneviève consulté un diccionario' "I went through Port Royal boulevard, took St. Marcel and L'Hôpital...I consulted a dictionary at Saint-Geneviève Library" (my trans.; 161). If we follow the order in which every street and building is named in the tale and pinpoint its position in a map of Paris, it is a fortunate sight to witness an almost regular polygon, which can be circumscribed. This hints to an interest in Cortázar's description to provide us the second instance of interest/focus in circles/cycles that is congruent with ideas present both in *Eureka* and "Circles." The narrator walks through *Boulevard Port Royal*, takes a left and then another one at *St. Marcel* and *L'Hôpital* in order to get to *Jardin des Plantes*. He then talks about going to *Bibliothèque Saint-Geneviève* to consult a dictionary with a definition for an axolotl. From Saint-Geneviève, in order to connect back to Port Royal, the straightest path would be to take Rue Saint-Jacques, making the trip circular. If the connection from *Saint-Geneviève* to *Port Royal* is not drawn, the circle is left incomplete. This is representative of the biology of axolotls, which are creatures whose composition is of great advantage for a short story concerning

physical and metaphysical cyclical nature. Contrary to most amphibians, *Ambystoma mexicanum* never undergo full metamorphosis when they reach adulthood due to a lack of TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone), thus remaining gilled and water-bound for the totality of their lives (Crown). Such features, or lack thereof, leave the animal in a state of neoteny which can be considered as mirroring a challenge of the completion of cycles and the barriers biological functions overcome as part of its survival mechanisms—even if that involves disrupting their life cycle.

The philosopher Joseph Vogl talks about telescopes and the process of stargazing as instruments of self-referentiality, “seeing is self-seeing, observation is self-observation, locating is self-locating” (19). This process of “self-location” is present in the narrator’s visual focus on the axolotl. ‘Me apoyaba en la barra de hierro...y me ponía a mirarlos. No hay nada de extraño en esto porque desde un primer momento comprendí que estábamos vinculados’ “I rested on the steel bar...and I looked at them. There is nothing strange in this since from the first time I understood we were connected” (my trans.; 162). This influence is greatly attributed to the German cosmological tradition of thinkers like Bruno, Leibniz, Kant, Schelling, and von Humboldt to whom Eureka is dedicated. This tradition “in which the origin, nature and destiny of the self is seen as identical with that of the cosmos” (Fugate 109), allowed Poe to merge the individual with the cosmos and reveal a scheme of thinking in terms of similitudes and closeness, and discovering simplicity/origin under complexity/cosmos (118) while also providing Cortázar with a way to merge the nature and the soul, the earthly and the divine, the animal and the human.

Using a concept of astronomy to illustrate the power of influence in knowledge and self-referentiality. Refraction is defined as a switch in the course of broadcast of electromagnetic radiation traversing the atmosphere (see fig.1). “As the light of a celestial body comes through the air, it is bent downward by refraction, so that the object seems to be higher in the sky than its true position” (Baker, 15).

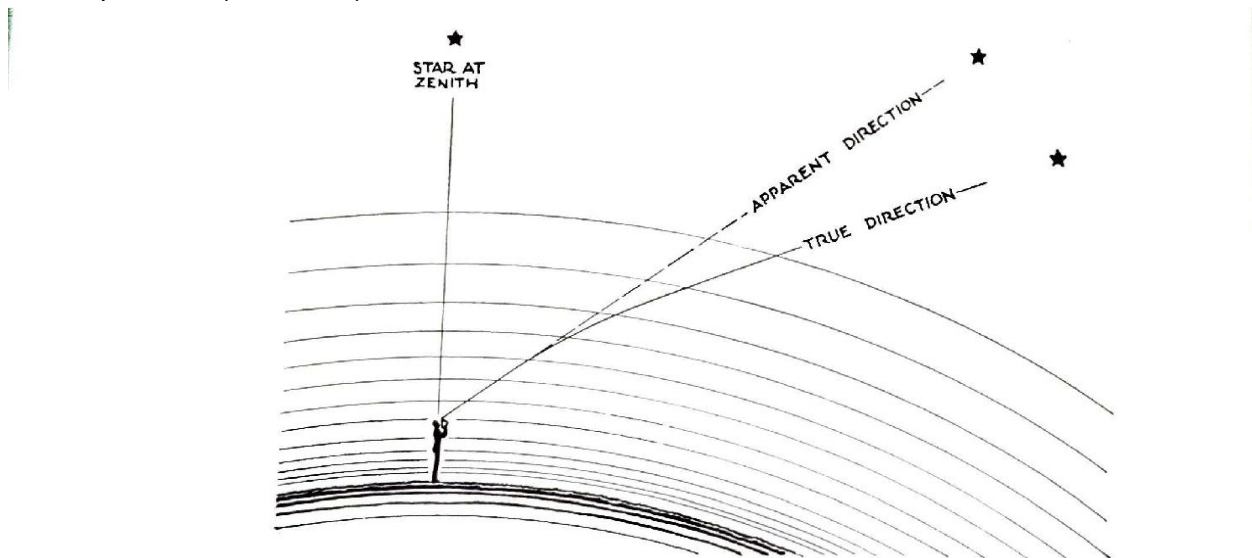


Figure 1. “The Stars are Elevated by Atmospheric Refraction.” Source: Baker, Robert. *An Introduction to Astronomy*. D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc. 1957.

Atmospheric refraction is a phenomenon present in nature which we all experience when looking up to the night sky, yet it is not perceived inductively. While many might argue that knowledge of this concept does not affect the practice of stargazing, to know that the direction in

which we locate a celestial body changes, modifies the way we think about such an event. It involves a number of factors: the vantage point of the viewer, as well as pressure, temperature, and turbulence the air particles in the atmosphere show, all of which bend the light which cause this and other playful visual games such as the twinkling of the stars, or the apparent flattening of the sun. In the case of Cortázar, the observer encounters a similar problem when looking at the axolotl in search for his own mind. As with stars as it is with knowledge, perception and external forces affect our comprehension of the subject being “observed” rendering it only partially situated within our view. The same way the apparent direction of a star deviates from its actual direction, so is our knowledge based on the point of reference by which we have attained it and the factors that influence our perception of any one idea.

The narrator mentions there are nine specimens of axolotl in the aquarium of *Jardin des Plantes*. The number itself is very significant on various accounts. In the fields of numerology and sacred geometry, widely considered as no more than speculative pseudoscience, the number 9 is considered the most profound in meaning and it traces back to its constant reference in circles and their circumventing or evolving capacity. Any number multiplied by 9 reduces to 9 when the factors are individualized and summed up. For example, $9 \times 9 = 81$. When 81 (the resulting digits) are added individually: $8 + 1 = 9$. Another example would be the 360 degrees that comprise a circle which, when separated into single digits and summed individually result in: $3 + 6 + 0 = 9$. Naturally, the sum of all exterior angles in a polygon, when given the same treatment, results in 360. If this number is related to a circle, and circles to cycles, the number of axolotl specimens present in the short story (although there has been no indication of Cortázar’s interest in numerology) has meaning.

The axolotl represents transcendentalist thinking. The stillness of the animal makes it seem as if time was of no consequence to its state. It alludes to Emerson’s argument of things being finite “The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet” (150). The stillness of the animal is compared by the narrator to a ‘*estatuilla corroída por el tiempo*’ “statuette corroded by time” (my trans.; Cortázar 163). Similarly, Emerson’s ideas on futility are presented in a similar fashion “The Greek sculpture is all melted away, as if it had been statues of ice” (149) reconciling the limited nature of existence faced by even the most enduring objects in history with the way in which matter that is natural requires little endurance, since it is preserved by its capacity to respawn cyclically.

Cortázar exhibits a big influence of Poe in the way he introduces the motifs of imprisonment and isolation in the short story. ‘*Los imaginé conscientes, esclavos de su cuerpo, infinitamente condenados a un silencio abismal, a una reflexión desesperada*’ “I imagined them conscious, slaves of their body, infinitely condemned to an abysmal silence, a desperate reflection” (my trans.;165). These motifs are present in a variety of stories by Poe like “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” all of which include an individual trapped, either by choice or force in a limited space, with the space they are circumscribed to being either physical, mental, or both. At the same time, the circumscription of space is a big portion of the metaphysical contentions made in *Eureka* in which matter is “*irradiated...into a limited Sphere of space*” (67).

Poe’s influence is also present in Cortázar’s focus on transmigration and other representations of cycles as exposed in the metempsychosis and prophecy fulfillment of “Metzengerstein.” Both short stories share the obsession and the conscience shift from the human to the animal, as well as the foreshadowing of a foretelling at the beginning of each tale. In Poe’s case, the effect of transmigration is connected to rebirth, since, going back to the main proposition in *Eureka*, “*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things*” (8) alluding to death as being the primal unity of things. Meanwhile, Cortázar performs

an indirect reference by association of this proposition, alluding to the main idea of the concept, yet paraphrasing it with the modification of a two-way exchange of consciousness which is much more transcendental in nature, an adjective that Poe would have denied as describer of his work. In the case of the prophecy, Poe presents it as such without any play on its nature or capacity. Cortázar's take is much less succinct in nature, rather deciding for, as David Lagmanovich alludes to in *Estudios Sobre los Cuentos de Cortázar*, the subversion of the natural cycle of a linear space-time (12-13).

There is a contrast, however, between the proposition made by Poe's *Eureka* and the possibilities of what reality is presented by Cortázar's "Axolotl." For the former, the exercise of comprehension is directly related to knowledge. For the latter, the limitations in comprehension of the nature of our universe and everything in it do not represent the boundaries of the mind. Rather, those boundaries are undefined and as such, have the capacity to be transgressed thanks to, what Cortázar alludes to as "la vía de lo fantástico" 'the route of the fantastic,' for which more than one influential idea is responsible for such a result.

Even though Western philosophy and literature worked their way into Cortázar's mind, such limitations provided by ideologies which do not afford the thinking of holistic continuity are inadequate (Lagmanovich 12) for which the author turned to Eastern doctrines, such as Hinduism and Zen Buddhism for inspiration, connecting Cortázar with figures like Thoreau, Alcott, and more importantly, Emerson. Arthur Versluis' *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* mentions how the Transcendentalist movement in America was very much dependent on both, Western thought and world religions "which [were] largely seen in the light of "universal progress" (3). For Emerson, in particular, this interest manifested on the latter part of his life, yet it proved instrumental for his ideology in terms of literary religion. Again, a holistic, inclusive approach, expressed in his essay "Religion" in which he claims all religions, regardless of geographical location, follow a set of morals that is universal and thus, the answers to gaps in one are found in another since their root is the same (3).

The search for the unattainable fantasy in the mundane is a trademark of Cortázar's writing. Therefore, it came as no surprise that such focus did not evolve spontaneously. Poe's *Eureka* is the perfect example of how the sublimity of the cosmos has been theorized because of two intrinsic qualities: the capacity of the human mind to acquire knowledge from the environment, and the necessity of the mind to reflect and conceptualize on the environment around it. The influence which Poe provided to Cortázar is a well-researched field. Yet the inclusion of Emerson as a Transcendental thinker, as well as the minds of Hegel and Borges allow for a more holistic analysis of Cortázar's work. The word *holistic* is used with caution since the whole premise of a circle or a sphere of influence is that it is never completely researched, just as our thinkers realized and exposed in their writings on the past, present, and future of the universe and the quotidian.

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