

Death and the Compass
La muerte y la brújula

Guide based on:

Evelyn Fishburn & Psiche Hughes, A Dictionary of Borges
Various reference books.

Lönnrot, Erik A fictional name emphasising the theme of 'redness' in 'Death and the Compass'. Erik is associated with Erik the Red, the tenth-century Norse explorer whose exploits are recounted in the *Eriks saga*. Lönnrot is associated with Elias Lönnrot, one of the founders of modern Finnish literature who edited the Kaleva, a collection of Finnish folk songs, legends and riddles. Lab. 106 (769 *Ficc.* 143

* * *

From Borges' commentary in *The Aleph and Other Stories*: "The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man. [...] This is hinted by the similarity of their names. The end syllable in Lönnrot means "red" in German, and "Red Scarlach" is also translatable, in German, as "Red Scarlet."

Triste-le-Roy A name invented by Amanda Molina Vedia. In a note for an American edition of 'Death and the Compass' Borges wrote: 'Triste-le Roy itself is a heightened and distorted version of the roomy and pleasant "Hotel las Delicias", which still survives in so many memories.' Distinguishing features of the imagined villa Triste-le-Roy, such as its portico, its niches with half-dressed nymphs and its patio with white diamond-shaped tiles, can be seen in an engraving of the hotel by Borges' sister Norah. Lab.112(82) *Ficc.*143

* * *

From Borges' commentary in "The Aleph and other stories": "[...] When, in 1942, I undertook a nightmare version of the city in "Death and the Compass," my friends told me that at long last I had managed to evoke a sufficiently recognizable version of my home town. A few topographical elucidations may perhaps be in order. The Hôtel du Nord stands for the Plaza Hotel. The estuary is the Rio de la Plata, called "the great lion-covered river" by Lugones, and, far more efficiently, "the unmoving river" by Eduardo Mallea. The Rue de Toulon is the Paseo de Colón, or rather, in terms of rowdiness, the old Paseo de Julio, today called Leandro Alem. Triste-le-Roy, a beautiful name invented by Amanda Molina Vedia, stands for the new demolished Hotel Las Delicias in Androgué. (Amanda had painted a map of an imaginary island on the wall of her bedroom; on her map I discovered the name Triste-le-Roy.) In order to avoid any suspicion of realism, I used distorted names and placed in the story in some cosmopolitan setting beyond any specific geography."

Scharlach The master-criminal in 'Death and the Compass'; in German the name means both 'scarlet' and 'scarlet fever'. Lab.106(76) *Ficc.*143

Dupin, C. Auguste The detective hero of Poe's 'The Murder in the Rue Morgue', 'The Purloined Letter' and 'The Mystery of Marie Roget' who, by identifying with the mind of his opponent, manages to outwit him. Dupin is characterized as the analyst who,

combining reason and intuition, glories in the solving of enigmas almost as a spiritual pursuit. Poe conceived of him as 'a poet who brings to commonplace reality the discriminating eye of the artist, but who weighs his evidence as a logician and is able to extrapolate from the raw materials of the *real* world the *ideal* solution'. Lab. 106(76) *Ficc.*143

Podolsk A region of south-east Poland which passed to Russia in 1793. A heavy concentration of Jews lived in Podolsk, which became the centre of many important events in Jewish history. During the sixteenth century a spread of Cabbalistic teachings prepared the ground for the rise of the false Messianic movement of Shabbethai Zvi. In the eighteenth century Podolsk became the cradle of Hasidism, whose founder, Baal Shem Tov, was born and lived there. Owing to centuries of poverty and persecution, it became a breeding ground for superstition and religious intolerance, which are said to have been more rife in Podolsk than in any other place within the Jewish Pale of Settlement. Lab.106(76) *Ficc.*143

Carpathians (Cárpatos) A mountain range in eastern Europe. Lab. 106 (76): a 'war in the Carpathians' cannot be precisely located. The area is closely associated with Jewish pogroms and has a tenuous historical connection with Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov having gone into retreat there for a period. Lab. 106(76) *Ficc.*144

Tetrarch (Tetrarca) From the Greek for 'ruler of one of four divisions': a term meaning 'vassal-ruler' given to minor despots in the provinces of Judaea and Syria in the Roman period. Lab. 106 (77): there was obviously no Tetrarch of Galilee at the time in which 'Death and the Compass' was set, but the name recalls Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who was Tetrarch of Galilee during the lifetime of Jesus and who beheaded John the Baptist. Lab. 106 (77) *Ficc.* 144

Galilee (Galilea) A region in northern Israel, the northernmost district of ancient Palestine, extending from the Mediterranean to the river Jordan. Christ spent most of his early life in Galilee, where the greater part of his public ministry and most of his miracles took place.

Cabbala (or Cabala) From the Hebrew *Kabbal*, meaning 'to receive': 'the received', or traditional, lore. This general term is applied in Judaeo-Christianity to a body of religious knowledge and experience which seeks to provide a means of approaching God directly. The Cabbala is largely concerned with postulating cosmological systems: that is to say, with theories of the creation, maintenance and destiny of the world and the interrelation of its components. It includes a description of the role of man and other living creatures, the behavior of the heavenly hosts and the interaction of these with the Godhead. As a method of mystical and poetical exposition of the Scriptures, the Cabbala adopts an immanent approach to the Universe, believing in the hidden existence of godliness behind and within every material object. Thus in Cabbalistic thought the visible world is likened to a veil or curtain which esoteric interpretations are able to lift, revealing a more direct vision of the true mysteries of God and his creation. Since, according to the Jewish account of creation, language preceded the act of creation ('And God said, "Let there be

light"; and there was light'), there followed a belief in the magical properties of Hebrew, the language employed by God. In Hebrew each of the 22 letters has its equivalent numerical value, and an important Cabbalistic method of exegesis is *Gematria*, or the interpretation of the Scriptures based upon numerical calculations and combinations of the Hebrew letters. This method did not exclude belief in the magic and creative properties of the Hebrew letters which, if deciphered, might reveal not only the ineffable presence of God, but also his mysterious power of creation. A guide to the different Cabbalistic theories can be found in the Zohar, the holy book of Cabbalism. Borges was attracted to any idea which postulated the unreality of the visible world; what fascinated him particularly about the Cabbala was the idea of a systematic combinatorial method of mystical revelation (see 'Una vindicación de la cábala', *Disc.* 55-60). See Pentateuch. Lab. 39 (15) *Ficc.* 30, Lab. 107 (77) *Ficc.* 145

Fludd, Robert (1574-1637) An English physician and mystical philosopher, who combined medicine with faith-healing. As a philosopher Fludd was attracted to Cabbalistic thought and argued for the identity of physical and spiritual truth. His system, which may be termed 'materialist pantheism', held that the universe and all things created proceed from God and return to him. The universe consists of three worlds - the archetypal (God), the macrocosm (the world), and the microcosm (man) - which interrelate and act sympathetically on each other. Fludd was involved with the secret society of the Rosae Crucis (Rosicrucians) and was thought by De Quincey to have been influential in the resurgence of Freemasonry. Lab. 107 (77) *Ficc.* 145, Lab. 120 (90) *Ficc.* 162

Baal Shem A Hebrew word, meaning 'master of the Name'. Israel ben Eliezer (c.1700-1760) was known as Baal Shem Tov. He originated from Podolsk and was the founder of eighteenth-century Polish Hasidism. The title Baal Shem is based on his belief in the miraculous power of the Sacred Name, which he invoked to work miracles. Lab. 107 (77): any biography of Baal Shem would necessarily be highly fictional, since he left no writings and the little we know of him is interwoven with legend. Borges may, however, be referring to Martín Buber's *Die Legende des Baalschem* (1908: trans. 1955) Lab. 107 (77) *Ficc.* 145

Hasidim The plural of 'Hasid': Hebrew for pious, a term used for the followers of a popular religious movement which arose among Polish Jews in the eighteenth century as a reaction to rabbinical and ritual formalism. Under the charismatic leadership of their founder, Baal Shem Tov, the Hasidim, while continuing to adhere to strict observance of the Law, emphasized the joyousness of religion and the ecstasy of prayer, claiming that man's salvation lies in faith rather than religious knowledge. Their pantheistic concept of God was expressed in the belief that material objects are in reality the image of the deity. One of the distinguishing features of Hasidism was the unquestioned authority bestowed upon the Tzaddik, or spiritual leader, regarded as a mediator between man and God and endowed with supernatural powers. This personality cult, which led to much abuse and superstition, contributed to the animosity felt by orthodox Jews towards Hasidism and the persecution and even excommunication of their leaders by some rabbis, who considered them a godless sect. Lab. 116 (85): the idea that this animosity could lead to murder has

no basis in reality; yet it is not too fanciful for Scharlach to have built his masterplan on the premise that his enemy, the detective Lönnrot, might think it possible. Lab. 107(77) *Ficc.*145

Tetragrammaton From the Greek *tettara*, 'four' and *gramma*, 'letter': the technical name in Judaism for the four Hebrew letters J H V H denoting the pre-eminent name of God: that which is separate from, and which exceeds, all other appellations. Of uncertain meaning, it is generally thought to be etymologically connected with an imperfect form of the Hebrew verb 'to be'. The tetragrammaton was uttered only by the high priest during worship in the temple, probably to safeguard it from desecration by heathens. It was held in such reverence that, after the destruction of the temple, its utterance was forbidden, and in the liturgical passages in which it appeared it was pronounced *Adonai* ('Lord'). In a non-religious context it was referred to simply as 'the Name'. Lab. 112 (82): there is historical precedent for Borges' irreverent and perhaps subversive use of the tetragrammaton in 'Death and the Compass'. As its utterance fell into disuse its original pronunciation became uncertain (though it is now thought to be represented in English by the sound Yahweh'). Moreover it often came to be written in an abbreviated or substitute form worked out by means of combinations based on the numerical value of the four sacred letters. This extreme reverence attracted a heretical belief in its magic and healing properties, and its letters were used in magic papyri and inscribed in amulets. Lab. 107 (77) *Ficc.* 145

Alexander of Macedon (Alejandro de Macedonia) (356-323 BC) Alexander the Great, the son of Philip II of Macedon, from whom he inherited his military genius, and of Olympias, an Epirote princess, from whom he inherited his mysticism and impetuosity. His tutor was Aristotle. One of history's greatest generals, Alexander conquered most of the civilised world and was responsible for the hellenisation of the non-Greek world as far as India. Lab. 108 (78): it is difficult to trace with certainty the allusion to 'the crystal sphere which the Persians attributed to Alexander'. After his death, Alexander's fame was enhanced by a collection of fantastic medieval legends known as the *Romance of Alexander*. In one version, *L'Histoire du noble et vaillant Alexandre le Grand* (1569), there is the following passage: 'Having reached the ends of the earth and conquered all the nations, Alexander aspired to the dominion of the air. For this he obtained a *magic glass cage* [our italics] which enabled him to fly through the clouds and, with the help of an enchantress who knew the language of birds, achieved their submission.' But the allusion is probably to the universal mirror said to have been fashioned by Alexander (Iskander) in the Persian version of the legend. Aleph 56: throughout his life Alexander had a passion for Homer. According to Plutarch, on campaign he always slept with his sword and the *Iliad* under his pillow. See Charles XII. Lab. 108 (78) *Ficc.* 146, Aleph 56 (83) *Aleph* 55.

Azevedo (also **Acevedo**) Borges's family surname on his mother's side. Its Sephardic associations have suggested that Borges had Jewish ancestry, something that he has ambiguously both 'regretfully denied' and acknowledged (Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*, NY 1978, 12-13). Aleph 55 (82): Francisco Xavier Acevedo was a relative of Borges.

Ginzberg - Ginsburg - Gryphius Three aliases of the character Scharlach in 'Death and the Compass'. The first two are common Jewish surnames: Louis Ginzberg (1773-1848) was an American Talmudic and Rabbinic scholar who wrote extensively on Jewish subjects and edited the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*; David Ginsburg (1831-1914), who converted to Christianity in 1846, was the author of *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature*, first published in 1863. The narrator of 'The Unworthy Friend' is said to own books on the Cabbala by Ginsberg. Andreas Gryphius (1616-1664) was a leading German lyric poet and dramatist with a predilection for 'sanguinary themes and the terrors of the supernatural'. His delight in the absurd is exemplified by the title of one of his comedies, *Horribilicribrifax*.

Leusden, Johann (1624-1699) A Calvinist theologian, professor of Hebrew at the university of Utrecht and one of the foremost biblical scholars of his time, who wrote several treatises on the bible and Hebrew philology. The 1739 edition of his *Philologus Hebraicus*, published in Basel, consists of three treatises: the *Philologus Hebraeus*, the *Hebraeo-Graecus* and the *Mixtus*. Lab. 111 (81): the 33rd dissertation mentioned by Borges is to be found in the *Mixtus*, and not in the *Hebraeo-Graecus* as alleged, and the passage is quoted almost verbatim, the original reading: '*Vel dies est sacer destinatus exercitiis sacris, qui incipit a solis occasu usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis*' ('This day, which commences when the sun goes down and continues until sunset the following day, is a holy day dedicated to spiritual pursuits'). The dissertation discusses the basic difference in the division of hours or prayer times between the Jewish day, reckoned from dusk to dusk, and the Christian day reckoned from dawn to dawn. This difference, it argues, would explain a discrepancy in the account of the hour of Jesus' crucifixion as related by Mark (15:25) and John (19:14). Because the Jewish calendar is calculated on a lunar basis, its months do not run parallel to the Christian (solar) months. Thus the murders in 'Death and the Compass' should not be understood as having taken place on the fourth day of either a Christian or a Jewish month, but according to a private code existing between criminal and detective in which the beginning of the day was reckoned at dusk according to Jewish custom and the date of the month according to Christian. Lab. 111(81) *Ficc.*149

Spinoza, Baruj (1632-1677) A Dutch Jewish philosopher, an admirer and follower of the rationalism of Descartes and author of one of the most comprehensive systems of philosophy ever composed. His unorthodox views caused consternation among the Jews of Amsterdam who, in 1655, fearful of their position in a Christian environment, felt compelled to excommunicate him. Spinoza set out to deduce the nature of reality using a system conceived entirely through reason. His philosophy, expanded in *Ethics*, is essentially pantheistic and explains the universe as one substance or independent unity which must be its own cause. This belief led him to deduce that, since it comprises the whole of nature and its creation, this substance must be equivalent to God. Hence he concluded that God does not transcend the universe but is an impersonal force immanent in nature, an assertion that shocked his contemporaries. [...] Spinoza tries to achieve this intuition of God (or knowledge, or truth) through a logically deduced system of metaphysics in which arguments are advanced like geometrical theorems. Lab. 112 (81):

this particular characteristic of Spinoza's method of exposition highlights the significance of the compass in 'Death and the Compass'. Borges was attracted to the idea of Spinoza 'creating' God in his elaboration of a rational system of metaphysics and wrote two poems to this effect. The juxtaposition of reason and intuition is a distinguishing feature of Borges's own writing as exemplified in his often used formulation '*álgebra y fuego*' ('algebra and fire').

Euclid (fl. c.323-285 BC) A Greek mathematician from Alexandria who systematized contemporary mathematical knowledge. His treatise on geometry, *The Elements*, has remained the pre-eminent elementary geometry textbook for two thousand years. Such was Euclid's influence that until the beginning of the twentieth century geometry was referred to in British schools simply as 'Euclid'. Brodie 23 (25): the reference is to Spinoza's use of geometry in the exposition of his philosophical ideas.

Diana The Roman goddess of hunting, chastity, the moon and childbirth, identified with the Greek Artemis, twin sister of Apollo. Lab. 113 (83): the Greek statue of Diana the Huntress in the Louvre is commonly regarded as a companion piece to the Vatican's Apollo Belvedere. Both statues were much copied as ornamental figures in Neoclassical formal gardens. Lab. 113 (83) *Ficc.* 153, Lab. 151 (120) *Aleph* 36

Hermes In Greek mythology the herald or messenger of the gods, the protector of herdsmen and the god of science, commerce, invention, the arts and, above all, travellers. In this last role Hermes was also the guide of the souls of the dead to their final abode (psychopompos). In art he is usually represented as a vigorous youth with winged helmet and sandals. Lab. 113 (83): being a guide in both life and death, Hermes is referred to as two-faced.

Janus (Jano) In Roman mythology the two-faced God of doorways who was able to observe both the exterior and interior of private houses and the entrance and exit of public buildings. He thus became the god of departure and return and of the sun's rising and setting, and so was the special patron of all beginnings. He was honored on the first day of every month, and on the first month of every year (January). Lab. 115(84) *Ficc.*155

Goyim (Goím) The plural of the Hebrew *goy*, meaning nation: a Yiddish name for Gentiles, or non-Jews. Lab. 115(85) *Ficc.*155