

BORGES, CABBALA AND "CREATIVE MISREADING"

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"the always wandering meaning of all literary representation, according to which meaning wanders, like human tribulations, like error, from text to text, and within the text, from figure to figure."

Harold Bloom: *Kabbalah and Criticism*

The importance of "Borges and the Cabbala" has been well recognized by several critics. The two major works in this field are by Saúl Sosnowski (1976) and by Jaime Alazraki (1972). The former sees Borges's interest in the Cabbala as a means to discover the true secret of the universe and man's position within it. Alazraki reaches an opposing conclusion, suggesting that for Borges Cabbala is symbolic of "the agonizing history of mankind, played out between two stories — one imagined by God and the other fancied by man".¹ In this article I shall develop Alazraki's idea of "story", focussing more specifically on Borges's use of the Cabbalistic theme of the world as an infinitely speculative text whose meaning wanders, subject to permanent displacement by renewed meanings. The Cabbalists, as Borges knew, were not bound by the idea of communicable meaning; for them the significance of a text lay mainly in its incentive to further thought: "Sé que esos libros no están escritos para ser entendidos, están escritos para ser interpretados, son acicates para que el lector siga el pensamiento" (Borges 1980a: 16).

"I, a Jew" was the title of an article Borges wrote in the magazine *Megáfono* (April 1934) when accused of Jewish ancestry on the

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1 See too Alazraki (1971) and Rabi (1964).

grounds of his family surname Acevedo. The challenge was made in an ultra nationalistic periodical called *Crisol* at a time, 1934, when fascist ideologies were gaining ground in Argentina. Borges's reply, considered by Emir Monegal "a masterpiece of teasing" asked why it was that "our inquisitors are only interested in the Hebrews and not the Phoenicians, Numidians, Scythians, Babylonians, Huns, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Ethiopians, Illyrians, Paphlagonians, etc." and wondered why "The nights of Alexandria, Babylon, Carthage, Memphis" never succeeded in engendering a single grandfather: "only the tribes of the bituminous Black Sea (the Jews) seem to have had that power" (1978: 12). He repeatedly said, provocatively perhaps, how much he regretted not being a member of the Jewish people, and eventually accepted the possibility that the Acevedos might have been of Jewish Portuguese descent (they were from Catalonia), if only, one feels, to put an end to a tedious discussion.

Quién me dirá si estás en el perdido
 Laberinto de ríos seculares
 De mi sangre. Israel,...

he wrote after the Six Day War in an uncharacteristic involvement in a topical issue (*OP* p. 332).² I believe that in fact until the Falklands/Malvinas war this is the only incident in which Borges felt stirred to respond poetically to a political situation. But whereas in a poem written after the War in the South Atlantic,³ Borges adopted an ambivalent position, in "Israel" Borges's position is for once unequivocal:

un hombre que se obstina a ser inmortal
 y que ahora ha vuelto a su batalla,
 a la violenta luz de la victoria,
 hermoso como un león al mediodía (*OP* p. 333).⁴

Borges's philosemitism is well known. It found repeated means of expression in his frequent visits to and lectures at the "Hebraica", the Jewish cultural centre in Buenos Aires; his contributions to *Davar*, its journal and in his presentation of Jewish characters in his fiction. This is not to imply that he idealises Jews, as becomes immediately evident upon reading "Emma Zunz", to start with an obvious

2 References to Borges's poetry are to *Obra poética* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1977), abbreviated to *OP* (for references to his fiction see note 5).

3 "Juan López and John Ward" (in *The Times*, 18th September 1982).

4 The lion is the emblem of the tribe of Judah.

example. This story, published in 1949, is set in the predominantly Jewish atmosphere of the textile industry of Buenos Aires, and shows Borges's familiarity with this milieu. Edna Aizenberg, in her excellently documented research on Borges's relationship with things Jewish (1984), "lo hebreo", as she calls it describes Borges's pointedly overt stance against the growing antisemitism of fascist Argentina. Yet, as one would expect, Borges does not allow this conviction to invade his fictional world. Loewenthal, for one, is a despicable figure: hypocritical, cowardly, fraudulent, a perjurer conforming, in fact, with the antisemitic stereotype of the fat, money-grabbing, miserly Jew. "Había llorado con decoro, el año anterior, la inesperada muerte de su mujer — ¡una Gauss, que le trajo una buena dote! —, pero el dinero era su verdadera pasión." And then, as if cracking open the stereotype, the more intimate particularising detail, suggestive of a possible motive for his felony: "*Con íntimo bochorno se sabía menos apto para ganarlo que para conservarlo*" (A p. 64; my italics).⁵ Clearly, Borges feels sufficiently free to be able to write negatively about Jewish characters, even at such a sensitive time as immediately after World War Two. Emma Zunz's is a more complex presentation. As Borges has remarked in another context about Martín Fierro, there is in Emma Zunz a tension between the *tone* of the narrative, sympathetic and understanding, and the *actions* carried out by the protagonist. Her surname, Zunz, is palindromic in that it can be read upside up and upside down (and according to handwriting, also from left to right and right to left). This mirror image in the name embodies the duality of the story, in which one outward action, Emma's killing of Loewenthal, reflects two motives, or rather, one reversed motive which can be read either in one direction or its opposite.⁶ But the name Zunz is also an intriguing allusion to Leopoldo Zunz, one of the leading nineteenth century Jewish scholars of Hasidism. This popular religious movement arose in Poland, as a reaction to what was considered an excessive adherence to the letter of the law, and which encouraged among its followers a more direct approach to God, one based primarily upon direct prayer and intuition. Emma's decision to become the personal interpreter and executor of Divine Justice — "No por temor

References to Borges's fiction are to the Buenos Aires, Emecé edition of the *Obras completas* and abbreviated as follows: *F: Ficciones* (1956), *A: El Aleph* (1957), *I: El informe de Brodie* (1970).

Emma sets out to kill Loewenthal in order to avenge her father's honour; in the event, when killing Loewenthal, she is symbolically killing her father and avenging her own, and her mother's honour. Other interpretations of Jewish elements in "Emma Zunz" can be found in Aizenberg (1984) and Stavans (1986).

sino por ser un instrumento de la Justicia, ella no quería ser castigada" and "Los labios de Emma se atareaban, como los de quien reza en voz baja" (A p. 64) — can be read in this light. But one can play the names game indefinitely: Gauss is the name of a non-Euclidian geometer who belonged to the circle of Cantor, whose *Mengenlehre*, or Theory of Sets, is mentioned by Borges in "El aleph"; Urstein means something like "piedra elemental", "Ur" being a prefix much favoured by Martin Buber for its endless possibilities of regression. Buber, a German Jewish philosopher, also wrote on Hasidism; he is quoted by Borges in "La secta del fénix".

In "El indigno" Borges evokes the ambiguities felt by Jewish immigrants, and more specifically by their offspring, in establishing their position in society. The story focusses upon problems of divided loyalties, relevant to the Jewish immigrant anywhere, and indeed to any immigrant. Its protagonist, Santiago (formerly Jacobo) Fischbein,⁷ is an established bookseller, whose collection included — but not for sale — a copy of the *Kabbala Denudata* by Rosenroth. His life's story is told by someone else, a first person narrator sharing in some Borgesian autobiographical details such as the ownership of works by the Cabbalists Ginsburg and Waite. It relates to an episode in the past when as a young man Fischbein had betrayed the trust and friendship of the local "guapo", and "grassed" to the police on the plan to rob the Weidemann factory. Fischbein, the outsider, stands in confrontation with the indigenous — the marginal *vis a vis* the centre. He is attracted to the colourful life of banditry and bravery of the "strong men" from whom he learnt to smoke "and other things". Yet when he is taken into their confidence and allowed to participate in the planned robbery of the Weidemann factory, he informs the police of the intended crime. Now, this betrayal can be seen as either an act of loyalty to the Jewish owner of the factory about to be robbed or of extreme patriotic allegiance to the establishment of law and order in the country whose citizen the Jew is proud to become, to the extent that he is willing to suffer the inevitable opprobrium of the local uncomprehending police. Yet another reading, one of even greater abnegation, implies that he betrayed Ferrari out of loyalty and love, because he felt that the *guapo* was losing his power, or perhaps even that his power had been merely illusory, and needed to be constructed. The clue lies in the following sentence: "Los diarios, por supuesto, lo convirtieron en el héroe que acaso nunca fue y que yo había soñado" (I p. 35). Through his seemingly abject betrayal, Fischbein the Jew is *creating* Ferrari, the *guapo* god. The initial reference to the Cabbalistic inter-

7 The names Jacobo and Santiago are etymologically linked.

ests of both narrators opens up the surface story to this less literal interpretation. To the readers versed in Borges's previous works, the story repeats the theme of "Tres versiones de Judas" in which the identification of Judas with God is ultimately suggested in an extreme act of self sacrifice and self abasement. The progression Fischbein — Judas - God no longer seems far-fetched.⁸

Borges has referred to the Jewish people as "The People of the Book", an attribute put to original use in the confrontation between detective and criminal in "La muerte y la brújula". Books on Jewish mysticism are the instrument which traps Lönnrot, their detective reader, luring him to his death. Scharlach, the Jewish master-criminal with seemingly omnipotent powers, uses books to carry out his dastardly plan in several ways. First, as intimated, opportunistically, by abusing his opponent's interest in some mystical tomes; secondly, by relying on a reference to Spinoza, whose *more geométrico* (the method he adopted to explain the work of Descartes) insinuates a geometric means of investigation in Lönnrot's mind and thirdly, by deliberately misapplying the words underlined in the *Philologus Hebraeograecus's* 33rd Dissertation. This point is not fully appreciated in the otherwise exhaustive critical attention this story has received.⁹ Scharlach, the Jewish mastermind of the criminal operation, has created a unique, symbiotic relationship linking him with Lönnrot, his hapless victim. It is based upon a completely private code devised by Scharlach to be understood only by Lönnrot in which the months are reckoned according to the solar calendar of the Christians (the Jewish year is divided quite differently into lunar months), but the days are made to start and end at dusk as is the Jewish custom. Thus, the murders are committed on the fourth day of a non-existent month, or one that exists only in the private code of Scharlach and Lönnrot.

•"The People of the Book" believe that wisdom can be found even in individual letters, or a combination of letters. Concomitantly, in "La muerte y la brújula", the search for truth is based upon the Tetragrammaton, the four-lettered combination representing in Jewish tradition the hidden name of God, and providing Borges with a ready-made structure on which to exercise a further cynical subversion of systems of belief.

8 This point was completely missed by Aizenberg, *Aleph Weaver* (1984), who sees this story simply as an illustration of the failure of the Jewish community to integrate with the local population or, as she terms it, become *gauchos judíos*.

9 I discuss this point more fully in "Borges and *La muerte y la brújula*" (1987). See also Gallagher (1973: chapter on "Jorge Luis Borges"), Sturrock (1977) and McGuirk (1983).

There is no simple, sentimental presentation in Borges's fiction of Jewish traits or characteristics. "Guayaquil", a brilliant piece of self-mockery and ironic *exposé* of a certain fashionable kind of antisemitism, concerns the confrontation between an Argentine historian, of impeccable patriotic lineage and credentials, and a Dr. Eduardo Zimmerman, a refugee from the Third Reich. The latter comes from Prague and shares with his opponent, the unnamed narrator, an admiration for Gustav Meyrink's strange novel *The Golem*. The identification of Borges with the first-person narrator is strongly suggested, underlined by references to his ancestors (Coronel Suárez) and by the fact that he lives in calle Chile (Borges lived in calle Maipu, the name of a battle fought and won by San Martín in Chile). But Borges is also identified with the two opponents through their joint admiration for *The Golem*, the first novel Borges read in German.

The story's first and most immediate allusion is to the historic meeting at Guayaquil on 26-27 July 1822 between Generals San Martín and Bolívar. The proceedings of the meeting are shrouded in legend, never having been officially made known and each of the countries represented has traditionally given its nationalistic version. Thus Argentine history teaches that San Martín gave up command of his armies in an act of self-abnegation, sacrificing his power and position in order to further the cause of South American independence. It hints at Bolívar's ambition. This reading provides a sub-text to "Guayaquil", which also is concerned with self-abnegation and ambition. The rivalry has significantly been moved from the sword to the pen and exists between two historians, interpreters or, if preferred, creators of history. It is played out as the rivalling manifestations of Schopenhauerian Will. On the one side stands the narrator, full of confidence, his roots firm in his country, whose history is intertwined with that of his ancestors. He does not falter in his belief that he is the obvious and only candidate to be sent on the historic mission. He muses, with dramatic irony, "no se trataba de un duelo". His opponent, as a refugee from the Third Reich, is history's victim as the eternal outsider. His is an anomalous presence in the exaggeratedly *criollo* atmosphere of the narrators's patio with its "baldosas negras y blancas, las dos magnolias y el aljibe" (/ p. 115; my italics). He is shorter than his host, myopic, badly dressed, showily vulgar, not only because of his ready-made tie, but also because of the ostentatious features of his face, which, in the narrator's words, is *trop meublé*. The narrator's antisemitism is subtly evident in his reluctance to brand him as a Jew: "hebreo, por no decir judío". Their antagonistic relationship is emphasised by the fact that one has lived the historical moment in question, or at least can be said to be

carrying it in his veins, whereas the other knows it only from the written word. As he says, "Yo me nutro de textos y me trabuco; en usted vive el interesante pasado" (7p. 116). Yet the two opponents are linked by the books in their libraries: both have read, Meyrink's fantastic novel, and both have studied the works of Schopenhauer. This common bond transforms their relationship, Zimerman becoming the one whose Will is stronger and better able to impose itself upon his rival. With infinite subtlety he persuades his opponent to resign his claim and sets off for a journey of glory; confident of his strength, he had decided upon his success before he ever presented himself at the meeting. In terms of the legend of the historical meeting it is easy to establish a parallel between the relationship of San Martin and Bolivar and that of the narrator and Zimerman but the confrontation must also be taken on a metaphoric level. The critique of antisemitism, begun with "the masterpiece of teasing" in *Megáfono*, is continued in this story in the tone of the narrative, which pokes fun at the pompous rhetoric and narrow vision of the "Borgesian" narrator. This is consistent with an underlying theme in most of the stories in the collection *El informe de Brodie* concerning the replacement of the old patrician order by the new forces of immigration.¹⁰ In "Guayaquil", the new spirit of Argentina is represented by Zimerman, not in an idealised way, for there is clearly something obnoxious in his impudence, yet as the stronger, more vibrant and life-affirming impulse of a universal Will. Heaping paradox upon paradox, he, the Jew, is to Argentine culture the free, eclectic outsider capable of unfettered understanding which Borges, in "El escritor argentino y la tradición" had claimed as the place of the Argentine intellectual vis à vis European tradition.¹¹

It emerges that each of these stories is connected with one or other aspect of Cabbala; the same is true of all the other stories with a Jewish connection. This is hardly surprising given Borges's long-standing interest in the subject, as evidenced in his frequent statements in interviews and essays. Indeed, when asked by Ronald Christ (1967) whether he had ever tried to make his own stories cabbalistic his reply was simple: yes, he had.¹² Which is not to suggest that

10 I am indebted for this insight to my friend Dr. Eduardo Ortiz, of the Department of Mathematics at Imperial College, London.

11 An essay in *Discusión* (1932).

12 Borges mentions having read works by Gershom Scholem, Joshua Trachtenberg, Arthur Waite and various articles in the major Encyclopaedia (Sosnowski 1976: 16); some of his own writings on the subject are "Tamaño de mi esperanza" (in *Proa*, 1926), "Vindicación de la Cabala" (in *Discusión*, 1932) and "La Cabala" (in *Siete noches*, 1980b).

Borges was a Cabbala scholar: his interest lay in some of its fundamental tenets and their aesthetic possibilities. He states that he finds the idea that God condescended to write a book as incredible as the idea that he condescended to become a man, but is attracted to the literary implications of the former (1980b: 129). Borges approached the Cabbala with the same irreverence and originality of mind which he applied to other systems of thought yet it is evident from his work that he was particularly attracted to the subversive challenge presented by a sacred book, perfect in every detail, each and every letter divinely inspired and therefore the source of infinite speculation. Since nothing in a sacred text can be considered casual or of secondary importance, meanings have to be found within the boundaries of the text, through metaphoric interpretations. According to Cabbala, the Hebrew Scriptures, said to be the eternal and thus unchangeable work of God, can be opened to myriad interpretations. These different levels of meaning are reached by means of permutations based on the combination of letters and their numerical equivalent. It should be pointed out that each Hebrew character serves both as letter and number and thus lends itself particularly to cryptographic substitutions. (The replacement of one order by another either through the letters' position in the alphabet or calculations based on numerical equivalences.) In *Siete noches*, Borges gives as a contrast the example of the opening of *Don Quijote*, where anyone reaching interpretative conclusions from the permutations of the letters of *de la* in "En un lugar de la Mancha" would be considered totally out of his mind. Yet this is precisely the basic method of Cabbalistic exegesis.

The Cabbala, from the Hebrew cabbal, to receive, and, by extension, received tradition, is the general term applied in Judeo-Christi-animty to a body of religious knowledge and experience based upon esoteric scriptural exegesis which seeks to provide a means of approaching God directly, that is, without any mediating agent. According to Gershom Scholem, "it is the tradition of things divine, the sum of Jewish mysticism" (1965: 1). As a method of mystical and poetical exposition of the Scriptures, Cabbala presents a pantheistic 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 can be lifted by means of esoteric interpretations, to reveal a more direct vision of the true mysteries of God and his creation. This non-realist view of the universe, according to which anything visible is but a metaphor for something else, is at the heart of all symbolist apprehensions of the universe, whether religious or secular.¹³ What so fascinated Borges was the very strict discipline and the confines

within which Cabbala operated its hermeneutic possibilities or, to use a favoured metaphor of paradox, "su álgebra y fuego".¹⁴ This is where Cabbala differs from other mystical experiences. As explained by the critic Harold Bloom, it is more a mode of intellectual speculation than a way of union with God (1975: 47). Its quest for *gnosis* is centered upon an *interpretative* study of the Book, a critique which demanded innovative speculations to be undertaken within an appearance of strict adherence to tradition.

The etymology of Cabbala, *received tradition*, emphasizes this point. According to Scholem, the personal element is almost negligible: "Very rarely did a Cabbalist speak of his own way to God." This is not to imply that the individual was insignificant or irrelevant, but that he had to adapt his individuality to fit in within the prescribed parameters of a binding tradition. Any inner mystical experience was expressed as speculation upon new layers of traditional religion. Scholem points out that there are two basic questions facing a mystic within a system of divine revelation and acceptance of sacred books. One is how to find his experience reflected and anticipated in the sacred texts, and the other, how to bring his view of the world into harmony with the view accepted by his own tradition (1965: 32). This double pull between the individual and the general, is a conflict often exploited in the presentation of Borges's characters. It repeats the perennial clash between Nominalism and Idealism in which his fiction is located.

The mystical experience, says Scholem, is essentially amorphous, a bewildering chaos which has to be translated into intelligible form. A salient example of this attempt can be found in the long enumeration of disparate glimpses of the universe envisaged in the "aleph" in the story of that name. Yet this intuition of an unfathomable universe set off against man's vain attempt to understand it is not confined to any one story but is a constant preoccupation in Borges's fiction. Aspects of Cabbala which have most clearly found an echo in Borges's fiction, are to be found in stories connected primarily with *writing*, such as "La escritura del dios", "La biblioteca de Babel" and "El inmortal". Writing is connected to the mystical experience in that the moment the mystic tries to clarify his experience by reflection and formulate it, and especially when he attempts to communi-

13 The symbolist movement of the late 19th century is an obvious example of such visionary inspiration and urge to transcend reality. Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, all sought to evade everyday reality, but they pursued their dream with certain freedom, in a comparatively personal, individualistic way.

14 "álgebra y fuego" is used in *F* (p. 19) and in "Mateo XXV, 30" (*OP* p. 188); see too *Historia de la eternidad* (1963: 152).

cate it to others, he necessarily must impose a framework of conventional symbols and ideas upon it. If he tries to communicate his experience he is bound to do so in a language, in images and concepts, that were created before him, like the Golem awakening to consciousness "aprisionado en esta red sonora / de Antes, Después, Ayer, Mientras, Ahora, ..." ("El Golem", *OP* p. 201). This feeling of frustration is repeated in a line from "La escritura del Dios": "el éxtasis no repite sus símbolos" (*A* p. 120). In this story, Tzinacán, the Mayan magician, echoes sentiments which are steeped in Cabbalistic symbolism.¹⁵ He recalls that in the beginning of Creation God wrote a magic sentence which would survive the vicissitudes of time and eventually be deciphered by a chosen one to whom its wisdom would be revealed. This idea accords with a Cabbalistic interpretation of the formation of Adam which holds that in the beginning Adam knew the secret name of God, indeed Adam *was* God (a theory based upon the numerical permutations of the letters of Adam and the Tetragrammaton) and thus had knowledge of the secrets of the Universe. This knowledge was lost at the time of the Fall, and man is searching ever since to recover its memory (Scholem 1965: 161 f.).

This secret knowledge can be interpreted as the "hidden treasure" which Tzinacán is tenaciously keeping from his oppressors. A clue linking Tzinacán and Adam is the fact that Tzinacán, like Adam, cannot lift himself without magic from the dust. (Adam, as his name implies in Hebrew, was formed from red earth, or dust, to which he returned.) Tzinacán's search for a memory of a primordial meaning is similarly suggestive of the Cabbalist search for the lost secret: "Urgido por la fatalidad de hacer algo, de poblar de algún modo el tiempo, quise recordar, en mi sombra, todo lo que sabía. ... Así fui debelando los años, así fui entrando en posesión *de lo que ya era mío*" (*A* p. 116; my italics). "La escritura del dios", as its title implies, touches upon one of the fundamental concerns of Cabbala, namely, the primordial importance of language in the creation of the world and the belief that the universe is a cryptic text whose meaning may be elucidated through mystical exegesis. This accords with Tzinacán's belief that the jaguar's spots, black marks on a yellow background, are the bearers of a secret message. They place an order, a pattern, a configuration upon a meaningless background, much like letters do on a blank page. The transition from the spots to letters is deftly carried out: Tzinacán says "Dediqué largos años a aprender el orden

15 My argument does not seek to deny what the story owes to Maya and Aztec mythology: Tzinacán was the name of a Quiche *cacique* mentioned by Bernal Díaz whose vision of the origins of the world accords with passages from the Popol Vuh's or *Libro del Común's* account of Creation (see Alvarez 1984).

y la configuración de las manchas. Cada ciega jornada me concedía un instante de luz y así pude fijar en la mente las negras formas que tachaban el pelaje amarillo. Algunas incluían puntos; otras formaban rayas transversales en la cara interior de las piernas; otras, anulares, se repetían. *Acaso eran el mismo sonido o una misma palabra*" (A p. 118; my italics). Everything is text, God's text manifesting itself in the infinite text of the universe. Eventually, Tzinacán finds the meaning of the universe in the configuration of the spots of the jaguar pacing in the cell next to his: this rather unusual locus for a mystical revelation illustrates the Pantheistic concept underlying Cabbalism which sees god as being everywhere and everything being part of god. By placing the secret of Revelation in such a seemingly trivial but also exotic setting (from the perspective of Cabbalist centres, that is) Borges may arguably be emphasizing the absolute validity of these views, and their universal applicability, regardless of geographical or contextual limitations. On the other hand, an interpretation based upon the tone of the narrator, and one that I would favour, is that Borges may be humorously illustrating its absurdities: " ¡Oh dicha de entender, mayor que la de imaginar o de sentir! Vi el universo y vi los íntimos designios del universo ... Vi infinitos procesos que formaban una sola felicidad y, entendiéndolo todo, alcancé también a entender la escritura del tigre. Es una fórmula de catorce palabras casuales ... y me bastaría decirla en voz alta para ser todopoderoso" (A p. 120). When Tzinacán has his vision of ecstasy, he shares the negative fate of Revelation with other Borgesian characters. I am referring to Lönnrot, who followed the path of the Name and met his death; Hladik, whose secret miracle did not save him from the Prussian punctuality of the firing squad; Funes, who was weighed down and paralysed by his keenness of vision; Runeberg, who lost his mind, and "Borges", the narrator of "El aleph", whose ecstatic vision of the Universe had no corrective effect upon the petty vindictiveness of his reaction. This negative portrayal of Revelation should not be taken simply as a sign of Borges's "ludic" interest in the mocking of systems but is, paradoxically, close to the teachings of Cabbala. Fearing the danger of heresy from any untutored meddling with the realm of the obscure, the rabbis traditionally adopted a reticent attitude towards mystical aspirations to the extent of believing such speculation to be morally unhealthy.¹⁶

16 A famous cautionary tale is told in the Talmud (Compilation of Oral Law and Commentaries) of four sages who entered the Garden (of Knowledge) of whom one, Ben Azai, died, one perverted the young (harmed a tender plant) and one lost his reason. The story was familiar to Borges who alludes to it in "Tres versiones de Judas", mentioning Ben Azai, "que vio el Paraíso y murió".

Tzinacán's search for fourteen syllables (an eminently pedestrian number but also twice the mystic seven) believed to contain the secret of the Universe highlight the cosmogonic importance of language in Judeo-Christian tradition. It is based upon the basic trope that God *spoke* in order to create the world, so making language precede the act of creation: "And God *said*, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." Yet the traditional pre-eminence accorded to the *spoken* over the *written* in Western thought is subverted in Cabbala by a belief in a primordial text, a "writing before writing" out of which creation emerged and which has found a modern voice in Derrida's theory of the "trace" (*institution durable ou empreinte*), where he argues the primacy of writing over spoken and graphic expression (1976: 62 f.).

Cosmogonic speculations regarding the role of language are a fundamental aspect of the *Sepher Yezirah*, literally, *The Book of Creation*. Borges discusses this work in "Del culto de los libros"¹⁷ and it will be recalled that both Yarmolinsky, in "La muerte y la brújula", and Hladik, in "El milagro secreto", had worked on a translation of the *Sepher Yezirah*. This speculative text, dating from between the 3rd and 6th centuries, seeks to explain the act of creation as a process involving the transition of the universe from its infinite state to its finite manifestation. It is concerned with the changes that took place in the Deity as it existed in pre-creation — that is, as En Soph, or ineffable and unfathomable Endless Being — to a more personalized presence in the biblical story of creation. The negative emphasis of *En*, Hebrew for "nothing" and *Soph*, "end", seeks to convey the idea that God as he existed before creation was unknowable to man so that it lay beyond man's ability to express his existence. Any name would imply a limitation and would therefore be an impossibility. It is in this sense that the negative connotation of En Soph should be understood: as a refusal to place any boundaries upon the designation of God. This aspect of Cabbalistic thought suggests an essential mystical agnosticism, which finds keen resonance in Borges's stories. Repeatedly Borges subverts any belief in a certainty, exposing the partiality of man-made limitations upon every explanation of the Universe, whether philosophical, theological, or mystical. His consideration of these three schools of thought as branches of "la literatura fantástica" is too well known to need any further comment. Furthermore, the rejection of any possibility of closure found in all Borges's fiction is a statement about the ultimate unknowableness of reality which has much in common with the concept of the En Soph. But the fundamental aspect of the

17 Essay in *Otras Inquisiciones* (1960).

Sepher Yezirah which can be seen to have inspired Borges is the notion that explains the universe as the enactment of the written word (that is, reality as a reflection of a pre-existent text and not the other way round). In the *Sepher Yezirah*, Creation is related as a process involving the combination of ten divine emanations. (This is the process expressed above as evolution from En Soph to God of Creation. It is a theory of *influences* which owes much to gnosticism and neo-Platonism.) There are ten stages of emanation in the transformation of an Endless Being to a Creator of a finite world which in the *Sepher Yezirah* are expressed as primordial numbers and are combined with the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Together they form the "thirty-two secret paths of wisdom" through which everything that is and will be exists. Thus the *Sepher Yezirah* explains the creation as the result of the combination of thirty two letters and/or numbers. Borges has illustrated the idea of a primordial text in "La biblioteca de Babel" where there are a number of references to these concepts. For instance, those "others" who equate the Universe with the Library can be interpreted as Cabbalists: "El universo (que *otros* llaman la Biblioteca)." Similarly, the fundamental idea discovered by "un bibliotecario de genio" according to which all the books, however different in character, consist of the twenty two letters of the alphabet can be taken as a Cabbalistic reference. No specific alphabet is mentioned, but the number twenty two points to Hebrew. However, not to tie this point down too narrowly to one context alone, it is made to accord with the twenty five letters mentioned in the epigraph from *The Anatomy of Melancholy*¹* by means of a period, a comma and a space. The "gran libro circular de lomo continuo" (F p. 86) seen by some mystics in their ecstasy as synonymous with God, can be taken as a direct reference to the Torah, the Mosaic law regulating all aspects of Jewish life which is to this day handwritten on continuous parchment scrolled at each end and wound from one scroll to another in an ever-repeated cycle.

"La biblioteca de Babel" is particularly rich in Cabbalistic allusions. Apart from those already mentioned, one could point out "la escalera espiral que se abisma y se eleva hacia lo remoto" (F p. 85) as a not too veiled allusion to the Tower of Babel. The biblical tale of God's punishment for man's presumption in trying to reach heaven has been interpreted as a warning against the dangers of seeking esoteric knowledge. Knowledge is equated with power, and knowledge of the Name with the magical power of creation. In its interpretation as a metaphor of man's perennially doomed attempts to

18 "By this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters..." (*The Anatomy of Melancholy*, part. 2, sect. II, mem. IV).

gain knowledge of the universe, the story of the Tower of Babel stands as one of the fundamental themes in Borges's fiction.

The hallway mirror which faithfully duplicates the appearance of this Tower, or spiral staircase, introduces another Cabbalistic theory based upon the duality of creation. It is a concept expounded in the *Zohar*, the basic book of Jewish mysticism, to which Borges alludes on several occasions,¹⁹ according to which the process of creation is explained as having taken place on two planes: one above, concerning the emergence of the Creator from *En Soph*, and one below, concerning the creation of the world out of chaos. The speculation is based upon the first letter of Genesis which is not, as might have been expected, *aleph*, the opening letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but *beth*, the second letter whose numerical equivalent is two. The deduction that the Library is total and that its shelves register all past and potential knowledge accords with Jewish belief in the total and eternal wisdom of the Torah, a reason why the Jews consider themselves as the "People of the Book", and which is alluded to in Borges's story as "la superstición del Hombre del Libro". It is stated that one of the possible combinations of this total wisdom may be encompassed in the letters *dhcmlrchtjdj*. This absurd configuration humorously underlines the principle of the unlimited plasticity of the divine word. As the narrator of "La biblioteca" goes on to say, "Nadie puede articular una sílaba que no esté llena de ternuras y de temores; que no sea en alguno de esos lenguajes el nombre poderoso de un dios" (*F* p. 94). This quotation repeats a common belief in speculative Cabbalistic literature concerning different levels of esotericism, which holds that every permutation of letters can be a name of God, so that ultimately the whole of the Torah, and by extension all writing, can be reduced to names of God. But these are inexpressible: in Judaism, every reference to the Deity is either a periphrastic allusion, such as the Tetragrammaton, or the Shem Hamephorash (the pre-eminent name), or a metonymic reference to a divine attribute, such as mercy, compassion, might, radiance. These "contiguous signifiers", to change linguistic register momentarily, are as caught on a chain of eternal slippage and displacement in search of a non-contiguous, unfathomable God. Though the universe be the Library, and the Babel of its letters hide the name of God, this can never be reached in its plenitude since in its eternal form it is *En Soph*, a text unknowable to the human mind. Reality in Borges's fiction is equally unknowable.

Borges chose the Aleph as the title not only of one of his most memorable stories, but also of the collection in which it is housed.

19 In "El aleph" and in "An Autobiographical Essay".

As mentioned, this is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, unsounded, representing no more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel. It is considered by Cabbalists as the spiritual root of all the other letters, the source of all articulate sound, and thus the source of all discourse.²⁰ The Aleph is a most fitting metaphor for a microcosm reflecting the universe, yet there is a void in this plenitude, an "Everything and nothing", which is reminiscent of the duality found in all of Borges's writing, in which any attempt at meaning is immediately deconstructed by its counter-argument.

Harold Bloom, refers to the Cabbalists' practice of eternally interpreting and thus re-writing a basic text or archtext as "creative misreading", setting this as an example for all imaginative reading.²¹ I should like to conclude this selected analysis of Cabbalistic themes in Borges's fiction with a "creative misreading" of "El inmortal", a story whose subject matter makes it an obvious choice. "El inmortal" concerns a narrative text, a *cento*, which is symbolic of literature in that it is made up of different extracts of previous text woven around re-enactments of the Odyssey and other tales of eternal quests. It is full of quotations, some intratextual, of other writings by Borges such as "Princess Lucinge", a reference to a character mentioned in "Tlön"; others, intertextual, to wide-ranging allusions from Ecclesiastes to Shaw and others, unsaid, glaring from the empty spaces of suggestion, such as the absent presence of Swift's immortal Struldbruggs. An important clue to the significance of intertextuality can be found in "la tenacísima pluma del doctor Nahum Cordovero", the commentator of this enigmatic text. This choice of name is significant: Moses Cordovero was one of the most original exponents of Cabbala as a *theory of influences*, seeing every existing thing as endlessly correlated with the whole of creation. He was unique among the masters of Cabbala in seeking to explain the contradiction between a static, eternal Deity and its active worldly manifestation as a dialectical interplay between different images of God's presence. Such a "theory of influence" underpins, in a lay setting, the theme of "El inmortal" which deals with the same yet changing manifestations of an eternal author and his text.²² The fact that the narrator

20 For a fuller discussion of the Aleph in Borges's fiction see Levy (1976).

21 On this point, see Bloom (1975: 62 - 73) and chapter entitled "The Necessity of Misreading" (1975: 95 - 126).

22 There is some irony in the choice of the Odyssey as arch text, in view of the fact that in his essay "La cabala", Borges mentions the Odyssey as an example of a classical text which, however, does not have the pretensions of detailed perfection that are attributed to a sacred text such as the Bible (see 1980b: 125- 129).

of the text should be called Joseph Cartaphilus adds meaning to this Cabbalistic (mis)interpretation. Cartaphilus was the name by which Joseph of Arimathea was known in one mediaeval legend of the Wandering Jew, according to which he taunted Christ on the way to the Cross and was condemned to roam the earth until the Second Coming. The figure of the Wandering Jew, here recalled, was itself the subject of various legends, and became the inspiration of many works of literature.

The quests in "El inmortal", that of Odysseus and of the Wandering Jew, both mirror and reinforce each other as an illustration of literature, or what Bloom calls "the always wandering meaning of all literary representations" (1975: 82), Borges has said something similar more simply: "Quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas" and "Tengo pocas ideas, pero las disfrazo".

A variety of "things Jewish" that have had an effect upon Borges's creative imagination have been examined here. Some are allusions to names or to characters, others refer to larger themes such as metaphors of the universe rooted in Jewish tradition which find a special resonance in Borges's stories. All, however, are tinged by Cabbalistic overtones. It is clear that Borges was deeply inspired by the Cabbalists' particular method of understanding the universe, an exegesis at once rigorous yet inspired, "álgebra y fuego". What I hope has emerged equally clearly is that Borges has been a most able disciple-judging by the original and resourceful way to which he put his learning into practice. I refer, of course, to the Cabbalistic challenge presented by his own work.

RESUMEN

El artículo examina las influencias cabalísticas en la obra borgeana. Partiendo de un primer análisis de la presentación de personajes judíos en algunos de los cuentos "porteños", en los cuales las conexiones cabalísticas invitan al lector a aventurarse por caminos interpretativos de índole esotérica, el artículo intenta establecer cuáles son los aspectos de la cabala de mayor inspiración en la obra borgeana. Considera la fascinación de Borges por los métodos especulativos propios de la hermenéutica cabalística según los cuales el místico, aun en el momento de éxtasis, debe atenerse a las reglas y preceptos más estrictos de la tradición judía. Esta mezcla o juxtaposición de lo riguroso con lo intuitivo es lo que Borges llamaría, en otro contexto, el "álgebra y fuego" de la vida. Para los cabalistas el camino (cuya meta es inalcanzable) que llevaría a una gnosis mística está centrado en un estudio interpretativo del cifrado "libro de Dios". Según la autora, esta exegesis sería la base de la intertextualidad que se da a lo largo de la obra de Borges. Siguiendo las teorías sobre las influencias literarias del crítico norteamericano Harold Bloom, traza en la obra borgeana el tema de un texto eterno e inalcanzable, metáfora del universo, de escritura siempre cambiante y de significado inagotable. Pero lo que es búsqueda sería para los cabalistas, está visto con ironía y escepticismo en la obra "subversiva" del escritor argentino.

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