

A 21st Century Note on Borges's Kabbalism

Edna Aizenberg

After the spate of studies from the 1970s to the 1990s, the well of Borges and Jewish mysticism seems to have run dry. Borges criticism moved on from the symbolic corpus, pseudepigraphy, and the layers of meaning to other concerns. (Sosnowski, Alazraki, Rabi, and Aizenberg are among those who wrote on Borges and the Kabbalah in this period.)

The thing is while Borges critics moved on, so did scholars of the Kabbalah. The hegemony of Gershom Scholem, the grand-master of Kabbalistic scholarship, has waned, as researchers built on his foundational insights, but opened new avenues for investigation, asking different questions and emphasizing different aspects of Kabbalistic study. This swerve started me thinking if we could take a fresh look at Borges's Kabbalism, foregrounding areas that have not been examined at length. Here I'd like to briefly suggest how Borges might mesh with the new scholarship, widening the understanding of Borges and Jewish mysticism.

MYSTICISM IS NOT NONSENSE

The statement appears anodyne, but it is near revolutionary. In the late 1950s Gershom Scholem was still famously introduced before an academic lecture he was to deliver with the words: “Mysticism is nonsense, but the history of nonsense is scholarship” (*Jewish Mysticism* vii).

Today’s investigators tend not to agree with this categorical dismissal. Quite the contrary happens. Kabbalah in its manifold manifestations is largely conceived as content filled, spiritually relevant, literarily significant and ideologically forward looking. Rather than so-called rationalisms, it is Kabbalah that betokens some core ideas of modernity, be they human agency to repair the world or the dislocation of canons to move margins into centers. “Kabbalah,” writes Eric Jacobson, is “a jack-in-the-box which suddenly makes its home in the center of modernity” (48).

Borges early on took the Kabbalah seriously. In his renowned “Vindication,” speaking of the Kabbalah’s penchant for letter combinatorics, he says in the very first paragraph that it is easy to ridicule such operations; he prefers to understand them. For him the Kabbalah is precisely a tool for dislocating canons, shaking up literary forms and questioning beliefs. The Kabbalah challenges prevalent Western (read Greek) wisdom, overturning prevalent verities, Borges often remarked, for instance, the primacy of the oral over the written word. Kabbalistic letter-drunkenness suggests new models for human creativity, in his case, fodder for a word-smith who minimizes the accidental, honing his verbal violin to gestate a new kind of literature.

And the Kabbalah, Borges notes in his lecture “La Cábala” (1977), is not a philosophical museum piece; it can serve as a way of trying to understand the universe (OC 3: 271). We humans through our actions repair the planet and construct the divine (273). In Hebrew this process is called *tikkun olam*, restoring the world.

Borges’s no nonsense attitude towards Jewish mysticism anticipated the direction of scholarly thinking. Did Borges’s positivity influence the scholars?

CHRISTIAN KABBALAH

From the thirteenth century on, especially during the Renaissance down to the 19th and even early 20th centuries, figures such as Raymond Lull,

Jakob Böhme, Robert Fludd and Knorr von Rosenroth were attracted to Kabbalistic doctrine, often employing it to innovate within Christian thought or—incongruous as it may seem—within scientific inquiry, since the Kabbalah allowed belief in our capacity to uncover arcana. The list of Christian Kabbalists is much longer, but I have purposely chosen names that intrigued Borges and are found in his work.¹

Once considered the illegitimate stepchild of Jewish mysticism, in contemporary scholarship the Christian Kabbalah is appreciated as a legitimate field in its own right (Coudert 159; see also Dan, *The Christian Kabbalah*). Scholars have a more comparative approach now: How is Jewish mysticism related to other traditions? The Kabbalah's influence on the Christian Renaissance and early modern thought is better documented.

In some (jovial?) sense Borges is a Christian kabbalist, a latter-day incarnation of Hebraists who used Jewish mysticism in syncretic form to break molds. Borges continually names his precursors. I'll mention a few: Pierre Menard composes a monograph on Raymond Lull's *Ars magna generalis*, a real work. The thirteenth century Catalan savant, a favorite of Borges, offered to solve "all arcana by means of an apparatus of concentric, revolving discs of various sizes, subdivided into sectors with Latin words" (*Labyrinths* 213). The system is considered strikingly parallel to the method of letter permutations of the Kabbalah, both designed to attain and organize knowledge. Like Borges, many of the Christian kabbalists were fascinated by the Kabbalah's letter richness as a different path to greater perception and as a scheme for attempted understanding of the universe.

The renowned scholar, Joseph Dan, puts it in these words:

Christian Kabbalah can be described as an expression of a new attitude to language. One of its most meaningful manifestations is the rejection of the dominant Christian concept that truth is expressed in Latin and Greek . . . One of the most striking characteristics of Hebrew Kabbalah . . . that had an impact on the Christian Kabbalah, is the extension of meaning to non-semantic aspects of language. (70)

among these are the ones noted by Borges, "the numerical value of letters" and "the possibility of transmuting letters and exchanging them" (71).

1 Other important Christian kabbalists include Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494); Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522); Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680); Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614-1698).

Another fictional writer, the heterodox and hunted Hebraist Jaromir Hladík, studies “the indirect Jewish sources of Jacob Böhme” (*Labyrinths* 88). Böhme (1575- 1624), a heretical German Lutheran mystic, had an affinity to Kabbalistic concepts, such as God as the nothing and all, issuing forth conflicting attributes, and needing to be made whole. Hladik and Böhme both had mystical visions to direct them. Erik Lönnrot, also turning Hebraist, examines the philosophy of Robert Fludd, among other semi-real and totally fictitious Kabbalistic treatises. Fludd, a prominent seventeenth century English physician, adopted elements of the Kabbalah into his medicinal and spiritual practices. He equated Jesus with the Kabbalistic angel Metatron and the Christian word with the Aleph. He also designed beautifully conceived illustrations for his books, his ideas rendered as images, among them a vision of a circular dark Aleph breaking into an illuminated one. Could this have inspired Borges?

And appropriately saved for last, the bookstore owner Santiago Fischbein has but refuses to sell a curious copy of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth’s *Kabbalah denudata* (1677-1684). This is the magnum opus of Christian kabbalism, the largest collection of Kabbalistic texts published in Latin before the nineteenth century. Rosenroth, privy counsellor to the ruling duke of Salzbach, saw in the Kabbalah a key beyond gentile, Greek wisdom to unlock the secrets of the Book of Scripture as well as the Book of Nature, God’s other great writing. Christological speculation went hand in hand with scientific experimentation (chemistry). The Kabbalah’s emphasis on *tikkun* was translated into practical projects ranging from penal reform to chemical formulations (Coudert 166, 168; see also Idel 263). Interestingly, Borges often referred to the world as a ciphered Book that we humans try to decode.

My short excursus on Borges’s Kabbalistic Christian forebears underlines a fact that has been somewhat lost in the shuffle. Borges’s kabbalism is not just a Jewishly-rooted phenomenon, but a heterodox maneuver, filtered through non-Jewish sources, themselves already “impure.” Despite the rhyming of “Scholem” and “Golem,” and eventually reading Scholem’s learned tomes, Borges did *not* derive most of his knowledge from the renowned scholar but from the likes of Lull, Böhme, Fludd, and Rosenroth, supplemented by readings from nineteenth and early twentieth century occultists and erudites such as Arthur Edward Waite, Christian

D. Ginsburg, and Erich Bischoff. For the writer Christian Kabbalah is no illegitimate child but a source of information in its own right.

The inclusion of the precursors in his fiction is itself a “Kabbalistic trait,” to use Alazraki’s phrase, as Borges has his characters rehearse the gesture of studying and writing on the Kabbalah, in a literary *mise en abîme* that blurs the line between fact and fiction.

Unlike his ancestors, however, Borges has no theological agenda, but, as I have already remarked, many of the early modern Christian kabbalists went beyond metaphysics to the secular realm, with the Kabbalah an impetus for this-worldly endeavors. As for Borges’s down-to-earth activity: he liked to say that the world exists for a book. Literature is a life-affirming enterprise, contributing as much as chemistry or prison reform to *tikkun*.

THE *Zohar* AS LITERATURE

Borges might almost be called a “pioneer” of a literary approach to the *Zohar*, the medieval master compendium of Jewish mystical teachings, that shows a fellowship of kabbalists walking and talking Torah, creating mystical midrash and inventing stories. In his essay “Magias parciales del *Quijote*” (1949), he unexpectedly places the *Zohar* in the company of none other than the *Quixote*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, fictions that blur the lines between reality and unreality. Borges writes: “We think of the Spanish rabbi Moses of León, who composed the *Zohar*, or *Book of Splendor*, and divulged it as the work of a Palestinian rabbi of the second century” (*Labyrinths* 294). There is no hint of theology here but an appreciation of the *fictional* skills attributed to Moisés de León, who surprisingly is mentioned in the same breath as the three literary giants, especially Cervantes.

In this appreciation, Borges largely anticipated scholarly spheres, which have just began a concerted literary approximation to the mystical classic. Perhaps Borges, known in many circles for his deft use of the Kabbalah *in* literature, helped nudge younger scholars to study the Kabbalah *as* literature. By uncovering the fictional possibilities of the *Zohar*, mentioned in a short but pregnant fashion, he gave legitimacy to view the *Zohar* as a dreamt-up world.

Until a few years ago, Eitan Fischbane writes, the focus of scholarship was on “the historical question of authorship; the conceptual universe

zoharic theology, mythology, and symbolism; the exegetical dimensions of the text; the nature of mystical experience; and the representation of gender and sexuality.” He adds: “We are still in the early stages of our appreciation of the *Zohar* as a work of the literary imagination, as a product of poetic and narrative artistry” (*Jewish Mysticism* 58).

Curiously, Scholem, whose focus was exactly on the elements described by Fishbane, apologized for attempting a philological analysis of the *Zohar*. In the introduction to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) he reassures his readers that they will miss little by skipping the literary chapter.

This is the chapter where he calls the work a pseudoepigraphic “mystical novel,” composed in a “purely artificial” Aramaic, outwardly imitating the form of midrash, with proto-excursions into story telling (157, 163, 171). The book is “full of fictitious quotations and bogus references to imaginary writings,” displaying “a sense of humor” (174). After a few pages of “philology” Scholem moves to other matters, including the issue of authorship, naming the Castilian Moisés de León of Guadalajara (d. 1305).

The new scholars have begun to much expand their master’s literary comments, seeing artificiality and self-reflexiveness—what Hellner-Eschel calls the *Zohar*’s special language [*safah me-yuhedet*]—as essential to the genius of the work (22). They question the matter of single authorship and reject the *Zohar* as a closed book (Fishbane 57). They believe a mystical fellowship which included Moisés de León jointly wrote the text, and that it was only fixed (canonized) after being set in print in the sixteenth century.

Borges’s literary insight on the *Book of Splendor* has already made its way into the bibliography on the *Zohar* as literature, most directly in a comparative study on *Don Quixote* and the *Zohar* inspired by Borges’s quotation. Developing Borges’s idea, Nathan Wolski sees both works, albeit separated by some 300 years, as part of an Iberian cultural continuum in which “self-reflexive strategies” play a major role. Each book is “acutely aware of itself, aware of the circumstances of its own production, and . . . does not naively project the world it depicts without reflecting on the question of the dynamics of representation” (41).

Of course, all of this sounds exceedingly like Borges. That's why in 1949 Borges created the *Zohar* and *Don Quixote* as his precursors. The fiction-maker lay the groundwork for the scholar to catch up in 2015, sixty years later.

Edna Aizenberg
Marymount Manhattan College

WORKS CITED

- Borges, Jorge Luis. "La Cábala." *Obras completas*. Vol. 3. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1989. 267-75.
- . *Labyrinths*. Ed. and trans. James Irby and Donald Yates. New York: New Directions, 1964.
- . "Una vindicación de la Cábala." *Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974. 209-12.
- Coudert, Allison P. "Christian Kabbalah." *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*. Ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn. New York: New York UP, 2011. 159-72.
- Dan, Joseph. *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and their Christian Interpreters*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Fishbane, Eitan P. "The Zohar" Masterpiece of Jewish Mysticism." *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*. Ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn. New York and London: New York UP, 2011. 49-67.
- Hellner-Eshed, Melila. *A River Issues Forth from Eden: On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* [Hebrew]. Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Press, 2005.
- Idel, Moshe. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. Yale UP, 1988.
- Jacobson, Eric. "The Future of the Kabbalah: On the Dislocation of Past Primacy, the Problem of Evil, and the Future of Illusions." *Kabbalah and Modernity*. Ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 47-75.
- Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken, 1941.
- Wolski, Nathan. "Don Quixote and Sancho Panza Were Walking on the Way: El caballero andante and the *Book of Radiancy (Sefer-HaZohar)*." *Shofar* 27.2 (2009): 24-47.