

Islamic Esoteric Concepts as Borges Strategies

"I place no faith in interpretations, not even in mine."
J. L. Borges, prologue to *Historia de la eternidad*.

"He is an atheist, but he knows the orthodox interpretation of the Koran's most difficult passages, because every cultivated man is a theologian, and faith is not a requisite."
J. L. Borges, "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald."

Studies of Jorge Luis Borges's work invariably highlight the wealth of philosophical and theological influences that underlie his œuvre. Yet a search through the bibliography tracing these sources reveals disappointingly few titles elaborating on what strikes me as one of the major threads running through many of his works: Islamic mysticism. The paucity of such studies is especially surprising when one considers that Borges himself frequently referred to Islam and Islamic thinkers both in his written work and lectures at various academic fora. In *Seven Nights*, the series of public lectures originally given in Buenos Aires, he devotes a full chapter to a discussion of *The Thousand and One Nights*, claiming that the first translation of this collection was "a major event for all of European literature" (46). In *Borges on Writing*, an edited volume based on lectures he gave at a graduate writing seminar at Columbia University in 1971, he unambiguously acknowledges his attempt at writing in the Arab Islamic tradition. Thus he says of his short story "The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths" that he wanted it to sound as "a page -overlooked by Lane and Burton-out of the *Arabian Nights*" (109). In his fiction, he makes direct references to aspects of Islamic mysticism, as well as demonstrates a familiarity with Islamic esoteric writing that goes beyond superficial, mundane information. That Borges should be familiar with Islam is in no way surprising. He is an extremely erudite writer steeped in metaphysical tradition, but also in the Spanish heritage. That heritage itself reflects eight centuries of close interaction with Arabs (the Moors), as

Giovanna de Garayalde reminds readers and critics in *Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illuminations*, one of the very few works that foreground a link between the author and Sufism. "But eight centuries of co-existence," de Garayalde writes:

are not easily eliminated from a country's past, least of all in the case of Spain, where the Arab influence is evident in the physical aspects, the habits and the arts in general. And Sufism, precisely because it is not tied to any dogma, seems to have been one of the main factors uniting the two cultures, separated though they were by politico-religious fanaticisms (79).

In this essay, I wish to further foreground the Islamic concepts Borges weaves into his writing, by focussing on two short stories, "The Zahir" and "The Aleph."¹ I will also be referring to other works by Borges, in order to both support my thesis that Islamic references have permeated many of Borges's stories, and are thus not to be dismissed as haphazard or tangential, and because these various references also reveal the depth of Borges's knowledge of the Islamic cultural heritage. While I do not seek to suggest that Borges ever embraced the religious aspect of Sufism, I nevertheless would advance that his fascination with that sect's privileging of layered writing and multiple interpretations is a direct result of his own view that reading and writing are intimate companions, and that the best reading is a rewriting. (This view is best exemplified in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," an analysis of which falls outside the scope of this essay). The "burden of interpretation" is incumbent on the Sufis, as I demonstrate below.

"Belief in the Zahir is of Islamic origin," wrote Borges, the narrator in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Zahir" (200). This narrator is not absolutely sure who he is, nor what has happened to him, but he is sure something has happened to him, which has changed the course of his life. He has come across the Zahir. Borges, the narrator of "The Aleph," is at a loss for words: "And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past" (160)². But his experience is unique, and therefore uncommunicable. For he has seen the Aleph.

¹ All of my citations from these two stories are taken from the English translation of "The Aleph" by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, and that of "The Zahir" by Dudley Fitts, both anthologized in *Borges: A Reader*.

² "(...) empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten" (OC 1: 624).

"The Zahir" and "The Aleph," although written a number of years apart, are frequently paired by critics, as a number of stylistic and thematic parallels invite the comparison. The narrator in both stories is a man, Borges, who has had an experience that proves to be a revelation. This experience, in both cases, has left an indelible trace on him, left him a different person. In both cases, he finds himself questioning his sanity and unable to express what he has seen. In both cases, he becomes obsessed with his vision. Even minor, textual details correspond in the two stories: both begin with the death of a beloved woman and take place in Buenos Aires, as distinct from some abstract "universal" locale. The spiritual affinity, however, spans further back in time and space.

That belief in the Zahir should be of Islamic origin is not surprising, since *zahir* itself is not merely an Arabic word, it is, like all Arabic words contained in the Koran, ultimately an Islamic word: the Koran canonized the Arabic language of the seventh century A.D. (first century After the Hejira, or A.H.), and bound it forever to Islam. Today, even in countries where Arabic is not the native language, it is nevertheless acknowledged as the language of Islam, and devout Muslims everywhere outside of the Arab world recite the Koran not in their own language, but in Arabic. Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, is a case in point: the official language there is Indonesian, with Arabic being the language of religious (Islamic) studies. Indeed, the better non-Arabic renditions of the Koran are appropriately called "interpretations," for the language of Islam is held to be "untranslatable." In the case of non-Muslim Arabs, I contend that these are influenced by Islam, since it is my belief that language and culture are inexorably linked.³

Moreover "*zahir*," as Borges points out, means visible or apparent, and is one of Allah's attributes, since Allah is "apparent" in all his creation. *Zahir* as a concept is traditionally coupled with, and opposed to, *batin*, thus making up a complete entity comprising thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. *Batin*, another Arabic word, is the antonym of *zahir* and means inner, innermost, concealed. The *zahir* and the *batin* are as inseparable as two sides of a coin, and the Zahir is indeed a coin in the short story by this title.

³ This link has been explored in numerous other contexts, including the feminist and the postcolonial, which examine the cultural consequences of self-expression in languages that favor European man.

Who is qualified to look into the *batin* is at the root of a dispute in Islam dating back to the late second century A. H. For grasping the *batin* requires initiation if it is not to be detrimental to the seer. But seeing the *batin* is also mandatory for those who "have vision," failing which they would be sinners. And Borges, our narrator, has seen the Zahir, Allah's apparent aspect. Let us examine his thoughts and feelings upon coming across this threshold to the *batin*:

I stared at it for a moment, and went into the street, perhaps with the beginnings of a fever... As if in a dream, the thought that every piece of money entails such illustrious connotations seemed to me of huge, though inexplicable, importance...
Sleepless, obsessed, almost happy, I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since every coin whatsoever... is, strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures ("Zahir" 198-99)⁴.

Borges then goes on to say that he is a different man for having seen the Zahir, and that he cannot go back to his "pre-Zahir" state. This closely echoes the assertion of the Islamic thinker and mystic al-Ghazali that "there is certainly no point in trying to return to the level of naive and derivative belief once it has been left, since a condition of being at such a level is that one should not know one is there. When a man comes to know that, the glass of his naive beliefs is broken."⁵ This level, according to al-Ghazali, is lost as soon as one has had an insight into divinity.

An experience of the Zahir, according to Borges, leads to "madness or saintliness" ("Zahir" 201). The two terms are also paired, almost equated, in the Koran: "We know very well how they listen when they listen to thee, and when they conspire, when the evildoers say, 'You are only following a man bewitched!'" (XIV, 45). References to Islam and the linguistic aspects of the Koran itself also abound in "The Aleph." The Koran is most difficult to read because, unlike the Bible, which contains considerable narrative stretches and can be read with the expectations readers bring to narrative texts, the Koran does not offer this familiar pattern: it was revealed as a whole to Muhammad, who merely

⁴ "(...) lo miré un instante; salí a la calle, tal vez con un principio de fiebre. (...) Como en un sueño, el pensamiento de que toda moneda permite esas ilustres connotaciones me pareció de vasta, aunque inexplicable, importancia. (...) Insomne, poseído, casi feliz, pensé que nada hay menos material que el dinero, ya que cualquier moneda (...) es, en rigor, un repertorio de futuros posibles." (OC 1: 590-591)

⁵ Montgomery Watt's *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* includes a translation of al-Ghazali's "Deliverance from Error and Attachment to the Lord of Might and Majesty," hereafter referred to in the text as "Deliverance."

had it transcribed. As such it is believed to be a pure expression of Allah, and one of his attributes. The Koran recounts universal creation in divine terms, and makes therefore no distinction between past, present, and future. The Aleph, Borges writes, is "the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle" ("Aleph" 159). But Aleph is also the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, the language of Islam and its book. Further on Borges adds: "What my eyes saw was simultaneous, what I shall transcribe is successive, because language is successive" ("Aleph" 150)⁶. He finds himself, however, utterly incapable of giving a coherent account of his vision.

Here, once again, we are confronted not with reluctance but with the impossibility of recounting an experience that does not belong to this world, or at least to the quotidian—a feeling most familiar to the Muslim mystics, or Sufis. Thus al-Ghazali refers us to Ibn-al-Mu'tazz who, after a mystic experience, told the uninitiated: "Of the things I do not remember, what was, was,/ Think it good, do not ask an account of it" (67). Nor is it insignificant, in the context of our study, that Islam alone of the three monotheistic religions is one where a revelation most frequently results in failure to communicate. In Judaism, Yahweh revealed himself to prophets so that they, in turn, might share what they have seen with their fellow-believers. Some Hebraic prophets, such as Ezra and Baruch, were expressly instructed in their mystical vision not to occlude that vision, but this implies that they would have otherwise been able to express it. In Christianity, the emphasis is on "spreading the word." Moreover, both the Old and the New Testaments, with the exception of the Mosaic laws, are books about God. The Koran, on the other hand, is not a book about Allah as much as it is Allah's book. It is "A Book We have sent down to thee" (*Koran* XIV, 1). The Koran frequently refers to its own ambiguities, reminding the Muslims that some passages must be read at face value (literally, *zahir*), while others ought to be interpreted by "those who have been given knowledge in degrees" (*Koran* LVIII, 12), for the Koran is "a book whose verses are set clear, and then distinguished" (*Koran* XI, 1).

Yet a further digression is necessary here, before I move on to a discussion of Borges's style, which I shall try to show as a conscious attempt at *batini* writing. I had referred earlier to the *batin/zahir* dichotomy as the cause of a dispute in Islam. Although we cannot speak of a *batini*

⁶ "Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es." (*OC* 1: 625)

school as such, a group of thinkers, heralded by al-Ghazali (1058-1111), believe that with proper training, anyone can reach the *batin*. Al-Ghazali wrote two seminal books, *Deliverance from Error and Attachment to the Lord of Might and Majesty*, in which he presents Sufism as the only way to spiritual salvation, and *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (The Incoherence of Philosophy), in which he argues that Muslims should not be barred from attempting a *batini* reading of the Koran since, as he says, this allows for a greater grasp of the truth than philosophy will even make possible. Al-Ghazali supports his argument by citing the *sunna*: "There is the saying that the man who is mistaken in independent judgement receives a reward, but the man who is correct a twofold reward" (*Deliverance* 47). One is rewarded simply for having tried, regardless of the outcome of the attempt. Moreover, the risk of leading a member of the masses astray is moot to al-Ghazali, since interpretation is undertaken by the Sufis, who "are not men of words" (*Deliverance* 55). The word Sufi is believed to come from the Arabic "souf," meaning wool, since the Muslim mystics wore woollen garments. They traditionally withdrew from society, leading an ascetic, solitary life. Another etymological identification is with the root word *safa*, meaning purity. Some scholars argue that Sufi comes from Sophia, for wisdom. This would however imply that Greek "philosophy" influenced the Sufis, an untenable thesis, since Greek philosophy is grounded in the rational, an approach Sufism frequently disregards.

At the other end of the scale, the *zahirite* school, whose spokesperson is Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), believes that a member of the masses should not attempt to understand the inner (*batin*) meaning of ambiguous passages in the Koran, since this may lead to disbelief in the *zahir*—a sin under all circumstances—and will inevitably result in miscomprehension of the *batin*. For the masses, the Koran tells us, simply cannot understand, since God has not given them "knowledge in degrees." "And those who interpret for the layman are calling him to heresy, and they are heretics themselves," warns Ibn Rushd.⁷ Thus a member of the masses, a person who has no vision or intuition, no practice in "learning," is saved if s/he believes in the *zahir* of the ayah (Koranic verse): "The Merciful sat upon the throne" (Koran XX, 4). But should s/he be told that God has no material body, and can therefore not sit, s/he will stop believing in the *zahir*, yet will still fail to grasp God's immateriality. "As to the one who is not versed in learning, he must take things at

⁷ All translations from *Kitab fasl al-maqal* (*The Decisive Treatise*) are my own. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Treatise*.

face value, for interpretation in his case is heresy, and will lead to heresy" (*Treatise* 26-27).

Ibn Rushd was highly disturbed by the growing influence and popularity of al-Ghazali's ideas, and set out to write *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (The Incoherence of Incoherence), an overt attack on al-Ghazali's book, in which he repudiates mysticism and *batini* reading, and *The Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Harmony between Religion and Philosophy*, in which he argues that reason, not mysticism, can help clarify the complexities of Islam.

Borges sets up an analogous set of dialectical counterpoints in his various essays on the Platonists and Aristotelians, or the Realists and the Nominalists. Thus, in the short story "Averroes' Search," Borges deals with the dispute between the Muslim thinkers, suggesting that Averroes will always fall short of full understanding. Both schools refer to interpretation as the "rending of the veil," that essential image in Islam, which Borges picks up twice in "The Zahir."

In this story, Borges the narrator has seen a most perplexing and disturbing aspect of Allah: "There was a time when I could visualize the obverse and then the reverse. Now I see them simultaneously," he says of the coin (202)⁸. Unable to comprehend this phenomenon, he struggles to forget or ignore it, but his attempts are all vain, and he begins to lose his own identity: "Before 1948, Julia's destiny will have caught up with me. I shall not know who Borges was " (202)⁹. Julia is in a madhouse, for she too has had a vision, leading to "madness or saintliness," Borges says, to madness *and* saintliness, the Koran suggests. Clementina's sister Julia—and we shall soon see what these women symbolize—was thought to have lost her sanity: "Poor Julie! She got awfully *queer*, and they had to shut her up in the Bosch," laments one of her friends. "Why, she keeps on talking about a *coin*, just like Morena Sachmann's *chauffeur*" (201)¹⁰.

Borges himself sees no reason to fear such a destiny, should it befall him too: "To call this prospect terrible is a fallacy, for none of its circumstances will exist for me. One might as well say that an anesthetized

⁸ "Antes yo me figuraba el anverso y después el reverso; ahora, veo simultáneamente los dos." (OC 1: 594)

⁹ "Antes de 1948, el destino de Julia me habrá alcanzado. (...) no sabré quién fue Borges." (OC 1: 595)

¹⁰ "—Pobre Julita, se había puesto rarísima y la internaron en el Bosch. (...) Sigue delectándose con la moneda, idéntica al *chauffeur* de Morena Sackmann." (OC 1: 594)

man feels terrible pain when they open his cranium" (202)¹¹. Indeed, Borges is yearning for a yet greater obsession with the coin, for only then will he be fully anesthetized, self "unconscious." This he knows is a *sine qua non* for grasping the *batin*, and putting an end to his torment.

In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis recite their own names, or the ninety-nine divine names, until they become meaningless. I long to travel that path. Perhaps I shall conclude by wearing away the Zahir simply by thinking of it again and again. Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God (202)¹².

The Aleph is not as material, as obvious a manifestation of Allah, hence the person who sees it must be closer to selflessness, to a total immersion into God's creation, to a loss of all that is proper to his/her individuality. "I saw all the mirrors on earth, and none of them reflected me" ("Aleph" 161)¹³, Borges recalls, thus suggesting that, at least while his vision lasted, his individual existence was uncertain. Immediately after this vision of "the inconceivable universe," Borges manages to "pick [him]self up and utter: 'One hell of a—yes, one hell of a—' The matter-of-factness of my voice surprised me" (162)¹⁴.

Borges the narrator and Carlos Argentino, in "The Aleph," were rivals, competing for Beatriz's attention. A *zahiri* reading of this passage would therefore refer to a reluctance on Borges' part to admit Carlos Argentino's clear advantage, for the latter is Beatriz' cousin, and the Aleph was seen under his own roof. A *batini* reading is much richer: Borges, having experienced a direct vision, grows indifferent to Beatriz, the mediator, the guide (who, moreover, was not sufficiently qualified to guide the visionary Dante through Paradiso, but abandoned him instead at the outer gates of Purgatorio). Borges' voice, his medium of expression and communication, becomes "matter of fact." But Borges and Carlos Argentino are also two writers competing for the same literary prize, which the latter wins, because Borges could not put, in

¹¹ "Calificar de terrible ese porvenir es una falacia, ya que ninguna de sus circunstancias obrará sobre mí. Tanto valdría mantener que es terrible el dolor de un anestesiado a quien le abren el cráneo." (OC 1: 595)

¹² "Para perderse en Dios, los sufíes repiten su propio nombre o los noventa y nueve nombres divinos hasta que éstos ya nada quieren decir. Yo anhelo recorrer esa senda. Quizá yo acabe por gastar el Zahir a fuerza de pensarlo y de repensarlo; quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios." (OC 1: 595)

¹³ "(...) vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó" (OC 1: 625).

¹⁴ "(...) acerté a levantarme y a balbucear: / —Formidable. Sí, formidable./ La indiferencia de mi voz me extrañó." (OC 1: 626)

“successive language,” his vision of the universe. In this instance too, Borges is indifferent to Carlos Argentino’s material, worldly, and wordly success, and to his own failure.

A very similar change had occurred in “The Zahir.” Borges had gone to Clementina’s house and, while there, inquired about Julia. Upon being told that she had been hospitalized, he reflects that this prospect is not terrible. “Clementina” means gentle, complacent, undemanding, yet Borges now thinks of “the arrogant image of Clementina, physical pain” (202), hence his yearning to be “anesthetized.” Julia, on the other hand, means “God’s gift,” hence “I long to travel this path. . . Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God” (202).

But did Borges have a revelation, or was it just a dream, as he seems to suggest at the beginning of “The Zahir”? Again, the Muslims equate both: “God most High, however, has favoured His creatures by giving them something analogous to the faculty of prophecy, namely dreams. In the dream-state, a man apprehends what is to be in the future, which is something of the unseen; he does so explicitly or else clothed in a symbolic form whose interpretation is to be disclosed” (*Deliverance* 64). Borges feels the same way. As the narrator of the “Zahir,” he spoke of the coin as a repertory of possible futures,” like a dream. As a non-fictional persona, he wrote in *Seven Nights*: “In a psychology book I greatly admire. . . Gustav Spiller states that dreams correspond to the lowest plane of mental activity—I would maintain that, at least for me, this is an error” (26)¹⁵.

The Muslim mystics, al-Ghazali tells us, are “men who had real experiences, not men of words” (*Deliverance* 55). Yet some of the most beautiful Arabic poetry is written by Sufis, probably because of their effort to find the words most apt to describe the ineffable. Borges, again, is aware of this:

How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols. . . Perhaps the Gods might grant me a similar metaphor, but then this account would become contaminated by literature, with fiction (160-61)¹⁶.

¹⁵ “(...) en un libro de psicología que aprecio mucho, (...) de Gustav Spiller, se decía que los sueños corresponden al plano más bajo de la actividad mental —yo tengo para mí que es un error—” (*OC* 3: 221).

¹⁶ “(...), ¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? Los místicos, en análogo trance, prodigan los emblemas (...) Quizá

But why is Borges writing at all, if literature contaminates the truth, and if words for him suffer from “the guilty condition of being mere metaphors” (*Discusión* 57)¹⁷? One is tempted to venture a bold and ambitious suggestion. The Islamic mystics believed that they belonged to the elite who “had vision.” They could, to put it in simpler terms, read between the lines of their own writings, and knew that their fellow-mystics could and would do the same. Moreover, as al-Ghazali points out, “whoever sits in their company derives from them this faith, and none who sits in their company is pained” (*Deliverance* 62). None is pained because their literature, like the Koran, reads on a number of levels, has a *zahir* and a *batin*. For Sufi writing is, above all, esoteric writing.

Borges toys with the concept and techniques of esoteric writing throughout his work. Some of his short stories are indeed masterpieces of superimposed levels. “The garden of the Forking Paths” is one such story, and so is “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero.” This latter is replete with hints waiting to be picked up and decoded by the intelligent reader:

In Nolan’s work, the passages imitated from Shakespeare are the least dramatic; Ryan suspects that the author interpolated them so that in the future someone might hit upon the truth. He understands that he too forms part of Nolan’s plan... After a series of tenacious hesitations, he resolves to keep his discovery silent. He publishes a book dedicated to the hero’s glory; this, too, perhaps, was foreseen (*Labyrinths* 75)¹⁸.

Ryan, the reader of Nolan’s work, was led to the truth by the subtlest of written clues. He in turn publishes a book that conceals this truth from all but those who, like him, can get to the *batin*. But he does write a book, for only in words can one “disguise” the truth, and thus pass it on.

In this connection, Borges writes in his essay “H. G. Wells y las parábolas:” “Allegories, for example, propose to the reader a double or triple intuition, not figures that one can exchange for abstract nouns... I venture to infer from the preceding that it is absurd to reduce a story to its

los dioses no me negarían el hallazgo de una imagen equivalente, pero este informe quedaría contaminado de literatura, de falsedad.” (*OC* 1: 624-625)

¹⁷ “(...) sin contar su culpable condición de meras metáforas.” (*OC* 1: 210)

¹⁸ “En la obra de Nolan, los pasajes imitados de Shakespeare son los *menos* dramáticos; Ryan sospecha que el autor los intercaló para que una persona, en el porvenir, diera con la verdad. Comprende que él también forma parte de la trama de Nolan ... Al cabo de tenaces cavilaciones, resuelve silenciar el descubrimiento. Publica un libro dedicado a la gloria del héroe; también eso, tal vez, estaba previsto.” (*OC*: 1: 498)

moral, a parable to its mere intention, a 'form' to its 'content'" (*Discusión* 163-164)¹⁹. Borges frequently warns his readers—as indeed does the Koran—against the sterility of attempting to reduce words to their *zahir*. Thus he also quotes Flaubert: "the frantic desire to arrive at a conclusion is the most regrettable and most sterile of obsessions," reminding one that "art functions necessarily with symbols, the greatest sphere is but a point in the infinite" (*Discusión* 141)²⁰.

As a man who has lost his identity to "J. L. Borges, writer," (see for example "Borges and I," and "The Watcher,") Borges has indeed a very equivocal attitude towards writing. It is his fate, yet he is skeptical of it: "I am not interested in what one man may transmit to other men; like the philosopher, I think that nothing is communicable by the art of writing" (*Labyrinths* 139)²¹. This is ironical, for Borges, like the "philosopher," like Ryan, indeed just like the Sufis, does write.

Is he suggesting, even ironically, that knowledge can only come to a person as a result of individual experience and intuition, rather than hearsay and reading? This, once again, is an Islamic, mystic thought. Thus Hayy Ibn Yaqzan (literally, Alive the Son of Aware), hero of Abu-jaafar Ibn Tufayl's allegory *El Filósofo autodidacta*, finds that he has discovered the "true religion" without having read its book. According to this medieval text, Hayy was born "spontaneously" on an otherwise uninhabited island where he grew up amidst animals, observed nature closely, and reached faith in the unmoved mover. When he eventually met some Muslims—and learned to communicate—he realized he had discovered Islam without having read the Koran. This is not to say that books lie, but rather than the knowledge they contain, their real riches, their *batin*, will only be grasped by the initiate. The rest is mere words, the *zahir*. Indeed, Hayy soon grows disappointed with these Muslims, genuinely faithful as they are, yet too closely attached to the Koran, and he returns to his island to worship God, not his words.

¹⁹ "Las alegorías, por ejemplo, proponen al lector una doble o triple intuición, no unas figuras que se pueden canjear por nombres sustantivos abstractos. (...) me atrevo a inferir que es absurdo reducir una historia a su moraleja, una parábola a su mera intención, una 'forma' a su 'fondo'." (OC 1: 275)

²⁰ "El frenesí de llegar a una conclusión es la más funesta y estéril de las manías. El arte opera necesariamente con símbolos; la mayor esfera es un punto en el infinito" (OC 1: 261).

²¹ "No me interesa lo que un hombre pueda transmitir a otros hombres; como el filósofo, pienso que nada es comunicable por el arte de la escritura." (OC 1: 569)

Borges' multilayered style truly has a rich *batin*. Let us look at some of the references to esoteric writing that he includes in his work. We find these in his fiction as well as his essays. In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges (the narrator) and Bioy Casares are "engaged in a vast polemic concerning the composition of a novel in the first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers—very few readers—to perceive an atrocious or banal reality" (*Labyrinths* 3)²². Borges does compose such works, of course, not least among them "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." His fiction that is richest in mystic symbolism is written in the first person, with a wealth of paradoxes, shibboleths, and the occasional disfiguring of facts, such as his misspelling, only once, of the word *zahir*: "Zaheer," he writes, thus shifting the accent from the first syllable, where it is in Arabic, to the second. The misspelling (which also appears in the Spanish original) is borrowed, Borges claims, from the spelling of Philip Meadows Taylor ("Zahir" 201; *OC* 1: 593)).

In his essays too, Borges refers to esoteric writing and to his attempt at understanding it. Thus, in "Una vindicación de la cábala":

One is my almost total ignorance of the Hebrew language, the other is the fact that I do not wish to vindicate the doctrine but the hermeneutical or cryptographic procedures that lead to it. These precede, as is known, with the vertical reading of sacred texts, the reading referred to as *bouestrophedon*. . . the methodical substitution of some letters for others, the sum of the letters' numerical value, etc. To laugh at such procedures is easy, I prefer trying to understand them (*Disquisición* 55)²³.

Islam, which came centuries after Judaism, also adopted some of the elaborate methods of cryptic writing which Borges cites above. (See De Garayalde 79). Indeed, the Arabic language is very amenable to cryptographic writing, because of its reliance on diacritics to indicate certain syntactical functions for a word. Subject and object, for example, are

²² "(...) nos demoró una vasta polémica sobre la ejecución de una novela en primera persona, cuyo narrador omitiera o desfigurara los hechos e incurriera en diversas contradicciones, que permitieran a unos pocos lectores -a muy pocos lectores- la adivinación de una realidad atroz o banal." (*OC* 1: 431)

²³ "Uno es mi inocencia casi total del idioma hebreo; otro es la circunstancia de que no quiero vindicar la doctrina, sino los procedimientos hermenéuticos o criptográficos que a ella conducen. Estos procedimientos, como se sabe, son la lectura vertical de los textos sagrados, la lectura llamada *bouestrophedon* (...) metódica sustitución de una letras del alfabeto por otras, la suma del valor numérico de las letras, etc. Burlarse de tales operaciones es fácil, prefiero procurar entenderlas." (*OC* 1: 209)

distinguished not by their position before or after a verb, but by the diacritic on the last letter. These diacritics, not being part of the word, can easily be omitted, leading to ambiguity of meaning without the charge of poor orthography. Short vowels are also not part of the written word in Arabic, and should be indicated by diacritics. If these are missing, or slightly displaced (a frequent occurrence in calligraphic writing), the meaning of a word can be significantly modified.²⁴ Indeed, arcane writing is linguistically systemic to Arabic, and was a feature of much classical literature as well as religious writings.

In "Sentirse en muerte," we have Borges speak of yet another mystical experience he has had. And, once again, he suggests that he is entrusting it to inconclusive words: "The real moment of ecstasy and the possible insinuation of eternity which that night so generously bestowed on me will be crystallized in the avowed irresolution of these pages" (*Other Inquisitions* 180)²⁵.

Finally, if we look at Borges' complete *œuvre*, we find pieces of a puzzle that we must try to put together, since their creator himself says they can give us a clue as to who he is: "Through the years a man peoples a space with images of provinces, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face." (*Anthology* 203)²⁶

We can therefore attempt to figure out this face, from the labyrinthine writings of the "Argentine adrift on a sea of metaphysics," as Borges once described himself (*Inquisitions* 171). The year 1929, for example, could provide a major clue. It is the year Beatriz died in "The Aleph," and the date engraved on the coin Borges was given in "The Zahir." I began this essay by saying that the two stories are similar in more ways than one. Indeed, both begin with the death of a woman Borges had been infatuated with. These deaths represent the end of a possible

²⁴ An equivalent if oversimplified example in English would be the reliance on a mere accent mark, rather than the written vowel, to distinguish between "bit," "bat," and "but."

²⁵ "Quede pues en anécdota emocional la vislumbrada idea y en la confesa irresolución de esta hoja el momento verdadero de éxtasis y la insinuación posible de eternidad de que esa noche no me fue avara." (*OC* 2: 144)

²⁶ "A lo largo de los años puebla un espacio con imágenes de provincias, de reinos, de montañas, de bahías, de naves, de islas, de peces, de habitaciones, de instrumentos, de astros, de caballos y de personas. Poco antes de morir, descubre que ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara." (*OC* 2: 232)

physical relationship, and thus make possible experiences of a “meta-physical” nature. Clementina in “The Zahir,” and Beatriz in “The Aleph,” were worldly creatures, women of a fickle, capricious nature, who cared only for appearances, for the *zahir*. 1929, the year associated with their deaths, could read in esoteric writing, following the method of substituting numerical values for letters, JHVH, meaning Jehovah, since Arabic (like Hebrew) has no written vowels. Jehovah is also one of Allah’s names.

In *Seven Nights*, Borges says he owns Burton’s translation of the Islamic anthology, a collection he equates with infinity: “The idea of infinity is consubstantial with *The Thousand and One Nights*.”(46) Further in the same essay, he elaborates on the effect of this book on its readers: “One feels like getting lost in *The Thousand and One Nights*, one knows that entering that book one can forget one’s own poor human fate; one can enter a world, a world made up of archetypal figures but also of individuals.” (50)²⁷. The quotations Borges uses when citing this work have been identified as coming from Burton’s edition (de Garayalde 82). This identification is a give-away, for Burton was not a mere “Orientalist,” an Arab traveller of sorts. He was a scholar, fully competent in the language of Islam: he translated the *Thousand and One Nights*. More importantly, Burton was also the founder of a Sufi club. Yet Borges also tells us that the edition he owns is “limited to one thousand copies, for the thousand subscribers to the Burton Club, with the judicious commitment not to reproduce it” (*Historia de la eternidad* 112, my translation).

The Zahir, our starting point, is a coin, and therefore by definition very material. It is “worth twenty centavos,” Borges tells us (“Zahir” 197). Yet Borges cannot fail to remark that money is “a repertory of possible futures. Money is abstract” (199). His own writing is equally “material” and rich with possible readings.

One possibility is that Borges is a disciple of Averroes, an Aristotelian scholar playing with rhetoric. The story “Averroes’ Search,” however, indicates otherwise. In real life, Averroes had found it necessary to rebuke al-Ghazali, who championed *batini* interpretation. “Averroes’ Search,” Borges tells us, narrates “the process of a defeat” (*Labyrinths* 155). In it, Averroes is trying to vindicate the traditional, the familiar,

²⁷ “Uno tiene ganas de perderse en *Las mil y una noches*; uno sabe que entrando en ese libro puede olvidarse de su pobre destino humano; uno puede entrar en un mundo, y ese mundo está hecho de unas cuantas figuras arquetípicas y también de individuos.” (OC 3: 237)

without resorting to creativity or intuition. He is doomed to failure: "I felt that Averroes, wanting to imagine what a drama is without having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, wanting to imagine Averroes with no other sources than a few fragments from Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios" (*Labyrinths* 155)²⁸. This is Borges the narrator writing. Borges the author obviously knew his Averroes better, as evidenced in his various essays on the avatars of Greek philosophy.

A second possible reading would show Borges as an acolyte of al-Ghazali. If this is the case then, in the vein of true Sufism, he means nothing of, and much more than, what his words say. But not the opposite of what he is saying: Allah, for the member of the masses and the initiate alike, is sitting on a throne, and Sufi literature cannot harm those deprived of inner vision.

A third possibility would be that Borges is merely making a playful, literary use of his knowledge of Islamic mysticism and, by presenting us with arguments in favor and against each of the above two possibilities, warning us against being too credulous. This explanation seems to do our author most justice: Borges is a wily (and weary?) writer, aware that literature contaminates experiences. If these are equally contaminated by the two components of the *zahir/batin* dichotomy, the sterility of *zahir* is remedied, and the risk of (mis)heretical interpretation reduced.

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²⁸ "Sentí que Averroes, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroes, sin otro material que unos adarnes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios." (*OC* 1: 588).

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