

## KABBALISTIC BORGES AND TEXTUAL GOLEMS



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In 1935, Borges writes in the prologue to *A Universal History of Infamy* that he has falsified and distorted the tales of others in his first collection of stories. In 1972, Emir Rodríguez Monegal remarks that in that prologue, Borges is implicitly admitting that to reread, to translate, to retell are part of the literary invention: “[a]nd perhaps that to reread and translate *are* what literary creation is about,” Monegal adds (116). To say that a reader translates what is inchoately present in a story is to conceive the act of reading as a narrative engine, one that reorders the text into a new configuration and becomes in fact a form of writing. Monegal concludes that implicit in the many hints, allusions, and observations about readers and the act of reading that Borges made during his lifetime lies an aesthetic of reading.

Borges did not build discursively abstract theories as Eco, for example, has done recent years, along with a surprising number of critics who, like Eco, attempt to conceptualize and generalize the underlying principles of the reader’s role. “No soy poseedor de una estética,” Borges affirmed in the prologue to his collection of poems and prose, *Elogio de la sombra*, published in 1969. He then goes on to list the working do’s and don’ts of his writing, but concludes by saying that the norms he has listed are not obligations. They are subject

to change, and “el tiempo se encargará de abolirlas” (OC 2: 353). Borges declares that he does not believe in esthetic guidelines. They are useless abstractions that vary from author to author and from text to text; at best, Borges considers guidelines to be stimuli or instruments to be used on occasion.

However, one finds in the same prologue the same unwavering affirmation of the importance of reading, which is a constant in his career: “Un volumen en sí, no es un hecho estético, es un objeto físico entre otros; el hecho estético sólo puede ocurrir cuando lo escriben o lo leen” (354). Uncovering Borges’ reading esthetic involves searching for references to the act of reading in his pages and extrapolating principles from images and symbols that recur in his work. The specific contents of the sought esthetic have proved elusive. I do not know if the critics are any closer to understanding Borges’ concerns with reading as a coherent esthetic or if this is likely to happen, because images and symbols are slippery things. But one does find that many of Borges’ ideas about reading, authors and books appear to have been assimilated by theorists working in the field of reader-response criticism or reception esthetics.

In his work, Borges pioneered a number of ideas that would prove fundamental to the development of a form of criticism that focused on the activity of the reader. Even in his earliest essays, which date to 1926, Borges evinces a great interest in the contribution of the reader, and he will argue that this contribution is made essential by the nature of language. “Todo sustantivo es abreviatura,” he notes in one of the essays from *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (45). In a public discussion of Kabbalistic doctrine included in a book by Jaime Alazraki years later, Borges elaborates on the nature of prose by saying “every human text possesses an element of chance, something that has not been foreseen. In the case of a poet or a vigorous prose writer much has been foreseen, but there are elements left to chance” (55). The argument in both of these quotations is similar and based on the richness of language: the elements of language, creatively organized by the author, transcend his intentions and display more meanings than the ones intended by him.

The diminished authority of the author, diminished by the richness of language, is one of reader-response criticism’s central no-

tions, found repeatedly in Borges. Borges' arguments about books, readers and writers—the trifecta of reception esthetics—invariably attribute a greater authority to the reader and focus on the exchange that happens between book and reader, to the expense of the writer's role. The writer is, after all, physically and temporally excluded from the exchange, and unable to intervene in the process of reading. The greater the assumed degree of separation between author and book, the greater the text's potential for omnisemiosis, or the text's ability to mean, and the freer the reader is to generate meanings and shape the contents of the book.

The text becomes infinitely dependent on communities of readers, succeeding each other in time. As fond as Borges was of the idea of an infinite book, Borges was aware that the author's distance from the text produced misreadings, creative and otherwise, that left their mark on a particular book or genre's history. He finds a memorable example in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. When that short novel was published in 1886, Borges remarks, it was read as a detective story. Readers of the time must have been amazed by the revelation that both characters were one and the same man (OCC 845).

It is with the detective story in mind that Borges makes his boldest statement about the power of reading: "los géneros literarios dependen, quizás, menos de los textos que del modo en que éstos son leídos," he told his audience one evening at the Universidad de Belgrano (OC 4: 189). Borges considers the reader capable of constructing a particular text by applying the patterns or models an author uses in constructing his. The patterns or models are in fact rules of a certain order that organize text material in a certain way. It follows that in order to read correctly, the reader must conceive the book as belonging to a genre, and then read according to the pre-existing operations associated with that genre. Erroneous placement will result in some form of misreading, as we've seen with the case of Stevenson's novella.

The key notion of reading as participatory act is that the text-creating elements are not just set features found in the texts themselves, but exist as ready-made strategies that recover the meaning of texts, or re-animate them in some configuration of sense. The idea

also explains in part Borges' emphasis on "el hecho estético," that he defines as the en-counter between reader and book without which there would be no text.

Along with his general orientation towards the reader, Borges cultivated a number of symbols that function as condensed arguments for the fact that we live in a universe that like a book, calls for co-authoring acts of interpretations in order to be whole. We might recall the disorder of the infinite library of Babel; the labyrinths, representing fallible configurations of sense; the book as mirror; the garden of forking paths, which is an image charged with temporality and the secret dream form ordered universe. A number of arguments and conceptual symbols that figure in Borges' critical and fictional writings dealing with or alluding to this subject of reading have been traced to Gnostic or Kabbalistic sources, which Borges utilizes for their literary or even rhetorical significance rather than for their mystical value.

One of the symbols that Borges recovers from the Kabbalistic tradition is the golem, which unfortunately has received scant critical attention in the context of prevailing discussions about readers and books. The golem impacts on Borges' notion of "el hecho estético" and deepens our understanding of reading as a dynamic, text-creating activity. The golem is the product of an experiment in linguistic alchemy that involves God, the Holy Book, and the Kabbalistic interpreter. The purpose of the experiment is to create an entity, the golem, "which is more than a structure in the form of a man, but less than a being endowed with a soul" (Idel 34). The golem is an anthropomorphic text, both a reproduction of a book and an entity conceived in terms of a book by the interpreter. In the pages that follow we will see how Borges' work on the golem legend provides the grounds on which reader-response critics meet their precursors, the medieval masters of Kabbalah.

Borges learned of Kabbalah through a modern version of the golem legend published in 1914. Set in Bohemia, Gustav Meyrink's novel featured a menacing golem and was popular among readers of German. Borges was an adolescent at the time, and had turned fifteen on the eve of World War I. The war had surprised the family in Europe. The Borgeses had planned to stay a year and found

themselves living in temporary exile. Rodríguez Monegal reports in his biography of Borges that *The Golem* was the first novel that the boy read entirely in German, a language he would soon master.

From Meyrink's novel, Borges received his first impression of the golem as fantastic creature and not much more than an imprecise, if powerful, impression. *Der Golem* is an atmospheric novel, and the golem is a lumbering, shadowy presence in it, more an equivocal emanation of the claustrophobic environment of the ghetto than the product of an theurgical operation involving a holy book. The corpus of Kabbalah is merely a pretext for the recreation of a moment in the imaginary life of the city, when a golem roamed its streets after dark.

In the period between 1914 and 1919, when he became acquainted with the golem, Borges attended Collège Calvin in Geneva, read assiduously, and wrote sonnets in English and French, while he and his family waited the war out in neutral Switzerland (136). Borges recalls that by 1919, the year that marked the end of the family's stay, "it was . . . understood that I should devote myself to writing (...) and that I must work my way all by myself through trial and error" (*Aleph* 218). The family's European experience proved to be watershed years in Borges' writing career. Borges included a review of Meyrink's novel years later, as part of his initial contribution to *El Hogar*.

In 1936, Borges obtained an editing post at *El Hogar*, a Buenos Aires publication that allowed him to write biographical sketches and reviews of foreign authors and books. His first published reference to the golem appears in his comments to Meyrink's *The Angel of the Western Window* [*Der Engel vom westlichen Fenster*]:

A su autor (...) lo hizo famoso la novela fantástica *El Golem*, libro extraordinariamente visual, que combinaba graciosamente la mitología, la erótica, el turismo, el "color local" de Praga, los sueños premonitorios, los sueños de vidas ajenas anteriores y hasta la realidad. A ese libro feliz sucedieron otros un poco menos agradables. (OC 4: 213)

Two years later, Borges returns to Meyrink in the same biweekly column that he wrote for the illustrated magazine. He points out the influence that E. T. A. Hoffman and Edgar Allan Poe have had on its author and he again praises the golem book for the "visual style" of

its initial chapters, but notes that in later ones the influence of a Baedeker travel guide has overwhelmed Edgar Allan Poe's: "*El golem . . . es la vertiginosa historia de un sueño . . . No sé si *El golem* es un libro importante; sé que es un libro único*" (OC 4: 360). Across the ocean and a growing span of years, Borges remembers his youthful encounter with the dark, creative magic of the golem maker, whom he will represent in his own story, "*Las ruinas circulares*," three years later.

Borges composed "*Las ruinas circulares*" in 1939. The story was first published in the literary journal *Sur* in December of 1940 and was later included along with "*Death and the Compass*" in *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, published by Editorial Sur in 1941. In 1970, Borges would comment on the story's "dim Eastern setting" and its "timeless scheme," and also note that its title suggests "the Pythagorean and Eastern idea of cyclical time" (*Aleph* 267). However, the central event of the story is Borges' depiction of how a man attempts to bring another into existence by means of a set of prescribed operations of a magical nature.

"Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche," Borges writes, and the stranger who arrives at the ruins is moved by a magical project: "El propósito que lo guiaba no era imposible, aunque sí sobrenatural. Quería soñar un hombre: quería soñarlo con integridad minuciosa e imponerlo a la realidad" (OC 1: 451). Likewise, ecstatic Kabbalah conceived of a mystical moment when the permutations of the letters permitted the visualization of the golem (Idel 97).<sup>1</sup> The golem was the result of an intellectual union with the divine and represented a channel for understanding divine thought. The main instrument at the disposal of the Kabbalist for this daring act of cognition is the great hidden name of God.

The magic environment of Borges' story includes elements of Gnostic cosmogonies and of a natural pantheism alien from Kabbalistic thought, which is centered on the idea that the divine language of

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<sup>1</sup> Idel explains that in contrast to the material golem described in the writings of the Ashkenazi Hasidim, ecstatic Kabbalists did not conceive the golem as a lasting entity: The image of the creature apparently dissipates when the Kabbalist returns from the paranormal state of consciousness produced by the mystical exercises that produce the golem (104).

God created the world, and structured it like a book. He does make the idea of the Name an important part of the story. The magician, after purifying himself in the waters of the river, “adoró los dioses planetarios, *pronunció las sílabas lícitas de un nombre poderoso* y durmió. Casi inmediatamente, soñó con un corazón que latía” (453; my emphasis). Over the course of many nights and with the help of the planets, the magician creates a golem, “un hombre íntegro, un mancebo, pero éste no se incorporaba ni hablaba ni podía abrir los ojos” (453).

The golem’s mutism is a characteristic of the creature and indicative of the meaning of the word golem, which means “unformed matter” or “embryo” depending on context (Idel, *Golem* 296-302). In all accounts of the golem, he is silent, however. By creating a golem or living being, the Kabbalist becomes privy to cosmological secrets and challenges in some sense the supremacy of the Creator. The Kabbalist’s new status as a demiurge is diminished by the imperfection of the golem, who remains a silent witness to the power of the Word.

The act of cognition, or interpretive encounter between the knower and the known, modifies both subject and object, and the golem is evidence of the modification. In a similar vein, Borges places great value on the psychological impression that the reader receives from recognizing differences in the text and the altering power of perception. According to him, the interpretive act results in a physical modification of the subject and the modification registers somatically as a kind of *delectatio nervosa*: “Lo esencial es el hecho estético, el *thrill*, la modificación física que suscita cada lectura” (*Obra* 15).

There seems to be no abstract god of the intellect for Borges, as there is for the Kabbalist, but he plays with the idea ironically. The end of “Las ruinas circulares” reveals a regressive chain of creators that may or may not reach back to a First Cause, from whose divinity all ontological possibility emanates. In a characteristic move, he has transferred a mystical concept to the realm of profane and fantastic literature. The “esthetic act” implies the formulation of “networks of sense,” that are the reader’s various attempts to get to the truth of the matter. “La modificación” in Borges seems to imply a learning process, or transformation, that takes place in the reading event and modifies both the text and the reader.

The magician is successful in animating his golem with the help of the god of fire. Years later, the elated golem-maker finds out that he too is an artificial creation. Only after he succeeds in creating another entity, does the wizard find out that he too had been dreamt by another before him, and that the element of fire, which he worships and has helped him with his project, cannot destroy him:

Caminó contra los jirones de fuego. Estos no mordieron su carne, éstos lo acariciaron y lo inundaron sin calor y sin combustión. Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo. (OC 1: 455)

The master of the magical name, whose command of interpretation has allowed him to conceive of an entity arising from the abstract place of possibility extant between himself and the divine realm, is thus revealed to be a simulacrum. At the end of the story, the humbled golem-maker knows that another interpreter has preceded him in a chain of creations, and that he too is a golem.

The *modus operandi* of the Kabbalists, Borges reminds us, is based on a logical premise. Man, God, and the Holy Book are mutually intelligible. The assumption of mutual intelligibility is represented in the anthropomorphic features of the golem, and these in turn may explain the fascination that it holds as a symbol of the relation between man and his Maker. The key for the Kabbalist enterprise of interpretation is to discover the laws of the text that will lead to truth and the understanding of the divine mind, of which the Kabbalist's is a reflection. The intriguing attempts at decoding performed by the Kabbalist scholar in order to decipher the Scripture of God remind Borges of the ways of cryptography, used to discover a hidden message:

Un libro impenetrable a la contingencia, un mecanismo de infinitos propósitos, de variaciones infalibles, de revelaciones que acechan, de superposiciones de luz ¿cómo no interrogarlo hasta lo absurdo, hasta lo prolijo numérico, según hizo la cábala? (OC 1: 212)

Indeed, Kabbalist magic sought to externalize a religious law hidden in the language of Creation. Fittingly, Borges did not consider



Kabbalistic doctrine to be something fit for a museum; rather, he saw it as a sort of metaphor for the thinking mind (OC 3: 271).

In “Una vindicación de la cábala,” published in his *Discusión*, a book of essays that dates from 1932, Borges writes: “[N]o quiero vindicar la doctrina sino los procedimientos hermenéuticos o criptográficos que a ella conducen” (OC 1: 209). In another of the volume’s essays, Borges discusses connection between magic and art. According to Borges, novels and films counterpose “un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades” to “el asiático desorden del mundo real” (231). The “juego preciso” is the expression of a *magical* chain of cause and effect in which every detail is an omen and a cause.

The integrity of the novel lies with this type of magic: the text is ruled by a sort of order based not on reason, but on association and suggestion: “Un orden [lo] rige, lúcido y atávico—la primitiva claridad de la magia” (230). We are reminded of Kabbalist texts, which hint at the existence of truths in symbols and metaphors, and thus seek to engage the reader, who must interpret their figurative language with faith and precision. Later in the essay, Borges notes that “[t]odo episodio, en un cuidadoso relato, es de proyección ulterior” (231). The painstaking piece of fiction prefigures something still to come, Borges writes. Most of all, the organized text anticipates a reader in its future.

When in Borges’ poem “El golem,” Rabbi Judah Loew takes on the task of permutating letters in complex variations, he follows an ordered and purposeful sequence of operations to recapture the presence of the Au-thor, which was understood to be present in the Torah. In this mystical relation, the creation of the golem is a form of validation of the in-terpreter’s identification with the Book and its Author. Clearly, the au-thority of the author is much more reduced within a secular theory of reading. In it, the Kabbalist symbol for the cleaving with the text, the golem, becomes a symbol for the reader’s understanding of the text, or rather, *of his own reading of the text*, because as the critic Harold Bloom has explained “reading a text is necessarily the reading of a whole system of texts, and meaning is always wandering around between texts” (107).

In “El golem,” published in 1959, Borges is working closer to the popular legend of the creature that he first learned of from Mey-

rink's novel than to the Kabbalist treatises that he will identify in the golem entry that appears in 1967's *Libro de los seres imaginarios: the Talmud* (Sanhedrin, 65b), and the writings of Eleazar of Worms, one of the authors who gave the most detailed golem-making instructions in the thirteenth century. In his discussion on the creation of the artificial man, "the creativeness of the permutations of the alphabets, which served God in order to create the world, is also used in order to create a creature" (Idel 57). This is how Borges presents the idea in his poem:

Sediento de saber lo que Dios sabe,  
 Judá León se dio a permutaciones  
 de letras y a complejas variaciones  
 Y al fin pronunció el Nombre que la clave,  
 La Puerta, el Eco, el Huésped y el Palacio,  
 Sobre un muñeco que con torpes manos  
 labró, para enseñarle los arcanos  
 de las letras, del Tiempo y del Espacio (OC 2: 263)

Eleazar belonged to the Ashkenazi esoteric tradition and so, in contrast to the visualization technique associated with the Spanish ecstasies, we find in his writings the material clay puppet that the ritual will eventually animate. Again, in keeping with the thrust of our present argument, it is important to note that the linguistic formulas are indispensable for the animation of the clay. The linguistic world is infinitely more important for the Kabbalist than the world of the elements of fire, earth, wind, water.

Medieval sources describing the golem-making techniques usually included combinations of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and combinations between the letters of the divine name, or Tetragrammaton, by means of which the entire world was created. The creative power is in the letters, which are divine, though Moshe Idel mentions a nineteenth-century manuscript that makes the argument that "[t]he role of the combination of letters . . . is to help the mystic to concentrate his thought in order to as his question, or, in other words, to structure human thought in a certain way" (51). Either way, the bridge and the union that resulted from the reconstitution of the Name were the primary goal of the mystic.

Harold Bloom is of the opinion that what distinguishes Kabbalah from other varieties of mysticism is its emphasis on interpretation. The fragment of Borges' poem presented above includes an important reference to the mystical construction of the world, which it is the Kabbalist's responsibility to complete. "La Puerta, el Eco, el Huésped y el Palacio" are the names of four of the Sefirot,

complex figurations for God, tropes or turns of language that substitute for God. The Sefirot are like poems . . . they are not allegorical personifications . . . their potency is the power of signification rather than magic. (Bloom 25-6)

Superimposed on the notion of Sefirot, as we've seen, is the overarching idea of a Sacred Scripture and an Absolute Book, which for the Kabbalists was a means to an end and not, as is the case with profane books, an end in itself.

Borges might have had the magical creation of the golem in mind, when he informed his audience at the University of Belgrano in 1978 that Poe had created a reader by means of his Dupin stories. Poe's progeny need not be identified as a person living in Persia, Malaysia, or someone living in the backwoods of your own country, Borges argued. Sociological categories are irrelevant in identifying this reader. The point is that the person be familiar with detective fiction, because the reader created by Poe is a textual creature that reads with disbelief, questioning the text with a special kind of suspicion.

Using the example of detective fiction, Borges identifies a "reading self," an entity that is created from contact with books, and defined by a set of operations—e.g., questioning with a special kind of suspicion—necessary to construe the meaning of a text. Detective stories are a prime and clear example of how important operational rules are in construing a text. The premise of the story is that there is an answer yet to be determined from the presented evidence.

The reader familiar with Borges' work will not be surprised by this discussion of detective fiction in an essay that focuses on Borges, the golem and the Kabbalah. Borges, after all mixed the two in

one of his most celebrated stories.<sup>2</sup> The reader of detective stories recognizes in the thematization of an enigma an invitation to actively work toward the resolution of a mysterious event. Following rules of intellection like the Kabbalist, the reader of detective fiction produces engaged versions of the possible solution by arranging the information that appears in the story. Borges' postulation of an operational reader who is activated by contact with certain textual features foregrounds the processes through which we make sense of texts, the systems of codes, conventions and presuppositions that guide our reading acts.

Aspects of Borges's thoughts on the "esthetic act" and the creation of readers is found in the work of Georges Poulet, whose phenomenological approach leads him to recognize with Borges that "a book requires a reading consciousness for its realization as a work" (56). A comparison of Poulet's elegant elaboration of the relation between readers and texts and Borges's thoughts on the same theme might prove valuable in coming closer to a definition of what Borges called the "esthetic act."

A key term in Poulet's theory is the notion of "intentionality." Poulet defines "intentionality" as

the structuration of an act by which the subject imagines, or conceptualizes or is conscious of an object, thereby bringing the object into being; but the intuition of the object simultaneously constitutes the subject as a vessel of consciousness. The subject is thus (in intending the object) paradoxically the origin of all meaning but is also the effect of consciousness. (55)

Poulet's "intentionality" reiterates what Borges discussed under the rubric of "Berkeley's aesthetics" — that perception is an act of interpretation, that a text by itself is an empty notion, that "la poesía está en el comercio del poema con el lector" (*Obra* 15) and that, therefore, both are inextricably bound by the result of that exchange.

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<sup>2</sup> Borges hints at the connection in his "Autobiographical Essay:" "No apology is needed for the repeated mention of the Kabbalah [in "Death and the Compass"], for it provides the reader and the all-too-subtle detective with a false track, and the story is, as most of the names imply, a Jewish one. The Kabbalah also provides an additional sense of mystery" (*The Aleph* 269).

Poulet goes on to discuss the coming into existence of a "reading self," who is not the reader's consciousness, or that of the biographical author's. The reading self is a "third" that results from the act of reading, an "other" created from the reader's intercourse with the text. As a reader, Poulet explains, "I am a conscience astonished by an existence which is not mine, but which I experience as though it were mine" (60). Turning his attention to the text, Poulet explains: "The work constituted by the animating intention of the reader becomes (at the expense of the reader whose own life it suspends) a sort of human being . . . a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in one as the subject of its own objects" (59). The subject that interpretation reveals is a new creation, distinct from the author and the reader (59). A new entity has come into being in the exchange between reader and book. In literary terms, Poulet's theory approximates the creation of a golem.

In the context of Borges's writing, however, the creation of the reader has a sense different from Poulet's argument that a being in the text becomes reenergized and apparent with every reading, like a ghost who waits in the abandoned house for the new tenants to move in order to begin its old haunting rounds. There's a passivity in his wonderful argument suggestive of a book spirit that "transmigrates" from page to reader on the sonorous bridges of language, a notion not unlike Isaac Luria's idea "el alma de un muerto puede entrar en un alma desventurada para sostenerla o instruirla" (*OC* 2: 68).

For one thing, Borges's conception of the making of the reader receives from the literature of the detective an ineluctable sense of "game," a creative collaboration that reduces (while it opens up) the field of possibilities we call text. Secondly, Borges's well-developed notion of infinite "mirroring" denies the pivotal point in the object that Poulet conceives as being present in the written work. The pivotal point in Poulet wards off the infinite regress that threatens a notion of stable, unitary meaning in the text and by doing so, permits a consistent return of "the subject of its own objects" to take place in the exchange between the reader and what is read.

In Borges, the identity of a work of fiction is to be found in the multiplicity of crosscurrents of meaning. The theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain that a multiplicity "has neither subject nor ob-

ject—only determinations, sizes, and dimensions which cannot increase without changing its nature (thus the laws of combination increase as the multiplicity does)” (14). In other words, the golem is the product of an encounter with something that recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of multiplicity, a conglomerate of materials and intentions whose sense is up to the reader to conjecture, and that Borges called *ficciones*.

“El libro,” Borges wrote in 1951, “es una relación, es un eje de innumerables relaciones” (OC 2: 125). It is at the moment of interpretation, when the multiplicity is fitted with the mask of coherence, that the golem is revealed as the subject of the mask. The outline of mask becomes apparent when the codes by means of which the reader implements sense are traced, and the golem is colored by the compositional designs that the reader’s wishes and desires make evident in his or her own commerce with the vanishing text.

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