

ON BORGES'S PESKY ALEPH

Edna Aizenberg

1. A SERIOUS-COMEDIC CRITICAL COLLAGE

What was Borges up to in his latest volume? The symbol on the cover looked weird and the name sounded strange: *El Aleph*. Whatever it meant, and however you pronounced it, the “ph” at the end didn’t help matters. This was Buenos Aires in 1949. Couldn’t the man just write in plain and simple Castilian, and stop bothering readers with his foreign names and illegible signs?¹ But then, he’d already shown before that he was downright un-Argentine.²

Unless you were one of his initiated, he purposely kept you in the dark until the very end, when in a P.S. to the story that he also called “El Aleph,” he finally had the “courtesy” to explain: “Dos observaciones quiero agregar: una, sobre la naturaleza del Aleph; otra, sobre su nombre. Este, como es sabido, es el de la primera letra del alfabeto de la lengua sagrada. Su aplicación al disco de mi historia no parece casual. Para la Cábala, esa letra significa el En Soph, la ilimitada y pura divinidad; también se dijo que tiene la forma de un hombre que señala el cielo y la tierra, para indicar que el mundo inferior es el espejo y es el mapa del superior; para la *Mengenlehre*, es el símbolo de los números transfinitos” (OC 627).

1 “Parecería que Borges no puede imaginar en castellano” (Sol 7).

2 “Todo el material que figura en el libro es extranjero” (Sol 7).

There was Borges with his foreign name games again! At least you now had some inkling of where the “sacred” squiggle came from, and what it stood for—Hebrew, Cabala, *En Soph*. And at least you had an idea of why his friend Attilio Rossi, the artist and boss at Losada, put that circle with the shining rays on top of the Aleph thingamajig in his illustration for the cover.

But the jury was right when it rejected Borges for the National Literary Prize back in 1944. Then he’d pulled his Hebraic letter fantasies in “La muerte y la brujula,” something about the Tetragrammaton, JHVH, God’s unpronounceable Hebrew four-letter name, and the serial murders of Jews. You’d almost think that he was talking about what was going on right here with Ernesto Palacios’s (aka Ernst Palast’s) fascist thugs and their ilk (OC 503). Yet how could the jury give the award to such bizarre works that confounded even the savviest reader, so full of cerebral twists and turns, so dehumanized.³

2. THE FIRST LETTER OF THE HOLY TONGUE’S ALPHABET

Borges *was* controversial, but he didn’t hide where his *aleph* came from. Borges-like, a scrap of parchment unearthed among the Dead Sea Scrolls contains the oldest surviving writing of the phrase, “language of holiness,” *lashon haqodesh* (לשון הקודש); Hebrew’s status as *la lingua sagrada* goes back to antiquity. Over time, *lashon haqodesh* accrued clusters of meaning: it embodied the worship and literature of ancient Israel; it represented God’s own chosen idiom, distinctive among languages (Aaron 13, 14). Over space, *lashon haqodesh* spread west across the Mediterranean, through that collection of canonized texts known as the Hebrew Bible, transmitted by Judaism and its offspring, Christianity. To the east, Islam adopted and adapted the concept of *lashon haqodesh* to Hebrew’s close relation, Arabic and the Holy Qur’an.⁴ Why, then, hide Hebrew when Borges hailed it? In his study on the origin and spread of the aleph in antiquity,

3 “Si el jurado entendió que no podía ofrecer al pueblo argentino . . . con el galardón de la mayor recompensa nacional, una obra exótica y de decadencia . . . oscura hasta resultar a veces tenebrosa para cualquier lector . . . juzgamos que hizo bien” (Giusti).

4 Borges considered, and erased, the Arabic name *mihrab* for his sacred disc; it is the semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque that marks the direction of prayer, originally towards Jerusalem, later towards Mecca (Ortega 62; 76).

and its importance in Borges, Brotherston strangely makes no mention of the Hebrew language or the Hebrew Bible. The geography of the aleph's expansion through the Middle East and the Mediterranean likewise mentions Egypt, Phoenicia, the Greek islands, Malta, Sicily, Carthage, and Betis of Iberia, but not the Holy Land (234).

Lashon haqodesh eventually crossed the English Channel into Britannia, where Protestant culture fostered a deep regard for the Holy Writ. To quote Borges: “Yo llegué muy pronto a ese venero, a ese manantial, porque una de mis abuelas era inglesa y sabía la Biblia de memoria. Alguien citaba una sentencia bíblica y ella daba inmediatamente el capítulo y el versículo” (289). The availability of translations did not diminish veneration for *lashon haqodesh*. Here is Borges again:

Yo hubiera querido estudiar hebreo. La verdad es que sentí que era un idioma sagrado, un idioma inviolable para mí. Y, ahora, ya que hablé de literatura inglesa, quiero recordar al padre del gran poeta romántico inglés Coleridge, que era un pastor protestante y que asombraba a los lugareños usando en sus sermones lo que él llamaba “la lengua inmediata al Espíritu Santo”.

Yo no he llegado a esa lengua fuera de algunas palabras, pero no es necesario, creo, saber esa lengua para sentir su gravitación, su poderosa gravitación. (“Los primeros 25 años” 289)

3. A MAGICAL-MYSTICAL ALEPH



FIGURE 1.

Like Borges, Hebrew played letter games. As all early Semitic languages, it was originally written consonantly, with the twenty-two symbols developed by another close relative, Phoenician: for example, BRGS. But how did you read the word, *Birgus*, *Bargos*, *Burges*, or *Borges*? Hebrew came up with a solution: four consonants would do “double duty” as vowels

(Hoffman 40). The letters chosen were *aleph* (A), *yud* (Y), *heh* (H), and *vav* (W). Figure 1 illustrates the last three, inserted into the first one. Fascinatingly, the quartet happened to shape the two most powerful names of God in the Hebrew Bible, both taken from the root “to be”: *ehyeh* (הָיָה), and more often *YHWH* (יהוה). This second term is Borges’s Tetragrammaton, sometimes rendered, JHVH, as he does in “La muerte y la brújula” (OC 507). According to scholars, these four all-powerful letters assumed a magical aura early on, climaxing in the “language-intoxicated” mystical traditions of the Cabala (Ginsburg 33).

Borges knew about the graphic drunkenness of Jewish mysticism full well. God, the mystics taught, created the world through the permutation of archetypal letters, a model for human creativity; letters served as God’s unpronounceable names and as luminary signposts to visions of the Boundless One (*En Soph* in Hebrew), the Divine Beloved—hence letters, lights, visions, and love in “El Aleph.” That is why YHWH could be represented as forcefully shimmering beacons of light (Cordovero, 20, Figure 2). The *aleph* held a position of honor among the letter luminaries, signaling God’s name, as well as His oneness. Name and oneness are bundled together visually in the *aleph* shown before from cabalist Moisés Cordovero’s magnum opus *Pardes Rimonim* (68, Figure 1). Tilted at once towards heaven and earth, the *aleph* serves as the hook, link, and gate between God’s upper and lower domains; in his fiction, Borges makes the connection very clearly.

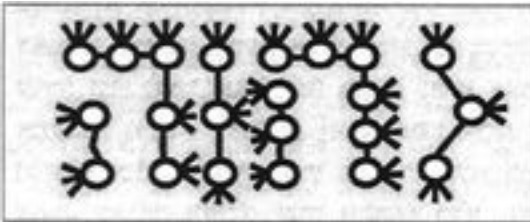


FIGURE 2.

He likewise connects the *aleph*'s elevated status as an instrument of creation to his own writing. Within the kaleidoscope of archetypal letters, *ℵ* begins the word, *מֵמֶלֶךְ*, *emet*, “truth,” yet another name for the Divine. Take the *ℵ* away, and you are left with *מֵמֶ*, *met*, “dead.” Borges masterfully revises this combinatory art in his poem “El golem,” where he picks up

the tradition of the golem-homunculus, inert clay animated, then disabled by *e/met* inscribed on its forehead (OC 885-87).

And as for naming his glowing disc *aleph*, this too, Borges tells us, comes from the Cabala, since the Jewish mystics saw the *En Soph* (קוֹן לֵאָלֵף), the shining Boundless One, embodied in the letter that began not only so many divine appellations, but also the very sacred alphabet itself. Intriguingly, they often drew the קוֹן לֵאָלֵף as a Core of Cores surrounded by concentric circles (*iggulim*, in Hebrew), forming the radiant disc of the *Sephirot*, God's emanations, and the metaphysical blueprint for the cosmos (Cordovero 24, Figure 2). Borges originally used the word *círculo* to describe the *aleph* in his story (Ortega 70; see also 95-96 and 107).

From the Cabala, the קוֹן לֵאָלֵף migrated to mathematics: Georg Cantor's *Mengenlehre*, or set theory, chose the *aleph* to symbolize transfinite numbers exactly because it meant "infinity".

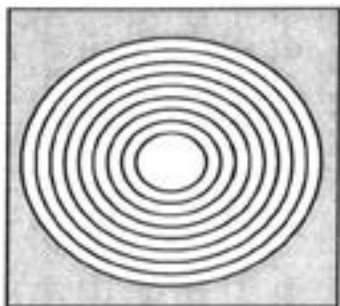


FIGURE 3.

4. BORGES'S PESKY ALEPH

Borges's *aleph* was reverent—and irreverent: holy tongue, name of God, instrument of creation, permutation, limitless, luminary, all of the above. Borges's humor typically undercut such sacred saturation. Carlos Argentino Daneri was a cad, after all, "Borges's" sexual adversary. And the *aleph* in the basement may have been a false one.

But recognizing Borges's maneuver of sacredness wrapped in sacrilege should not mask where Borges's *aleph* centrally came from.

Edna Aizenberg
Marymount Manhattan College

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