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978-0-521-31421-3 - Borges and the Kabbalah: And Other Essays on his Fiction and Poetry

Jaime Alazraki

Excerpt

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PART I

Borges and the Kabbalah

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1 Introduction

It was in Norman, Oklahoma, during the sessions and breaks of the international symposium on Borges held at the University of Oklahoma in December of 1969, that the idea of studying the impact of the Kabbalah on Borges' writings first took shape. The journal *TriQuarterly* was preparing a full issue devoted to him and when I was approached, I did not hesitate to commit myself to a piece dealing with this subject. It was also in Norman that I first met Borges. Earlier that same year, he had spent ten days in Israel as a guest of the government, and the impressions of this trip were still fresh in his mind. We talked about this visit and his memorable encounter there with Gershom Scholem. While I was a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, from 1958 to 1962, I attended Scholem's course on Jewish mysticism as well as Isaiah Tishby's seminar on the *Zohar*. Borges was the only author writing in Spanish who offered me the unique opportunity of combining my background in the Kabbalah with my professional interest in Spanish literature. I had already published two books on Borges, but the subject of his contacts with the Kabbalah was barely touched upon in those or in any other books. It was only after the Oklahoma symposium – spurred on as I was by my conversation with Borges on this topic and by my commitment to *TriQuarterly* – that I fully embarked on researching the subject. The results appeared in a long article included in *TriQuarterly*, Fall 1972, and in a second piece – “Kabbalistic Traits in Borges' Narratives” – published in the Winter 1971 issue of *Studies in Short Fiction* devoted to the Latin American short story. Although the latter appeared before the former, it represents a derivation from the first, applying the conclusions I reached in my previous examination of Borges' contacts with the Kabbalah to an analysis of his narrative texts. A third article dealing with

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Borges' poem "The Golem" appeared in the festschrift honoring the Spanish scholar Joaquin Casaldueiro, published in Spain in 1972.¹

In September 1971, I travelled to Argentina on a Guggenheim Fellowship. I saw Borges, who was at the time the director of the National Library, in Buenos Aires and had lunch with him. I asked if he would give me an interview to discuss his long acquaintance with the Kabbalah. He agreed, and gave me an appointment for the next morning. I showed up the following day at the library, equipped with my portable tape recorder and a long list of questions and notes. On that occasion I was to learn, first, of my own inadequacy as an interviewer; and, second, of the difficulties in pinning Borges down to a one-track conversation. He enjoys a branching dialogue in which even the most casual reference to a name, book, place or topic is sufficient reason to ruminate on other subjects. The result is a network of interlocking observations in which each question or remark leads his legendary memory to explore its reservoirs. The same question, asked on different occasions, would never elicit quite the same answer. One could be assured of an unexpected nuance, of a new detail, of a surprising twist. My mistake was – as I look back – attempting a dialogue focused on a single subject. Borges the conversationalist loved to establish unusual links between various authors and ideas, and to leap from one topic to another triggered by the first, as if he were exemplifying his old belief that perhaps all authors are one author, and all texts, one text.

I never brought myself to publish that interview. Borges has made of the interview a new literary genre, and I felt that this one, in spite of some insightful points, didn't warrant its addition to the several dozens – some of them book-length – already published. My own dissatisfaction with the results of my interview led me, however, to hunt down a lecture on the Kabbalah Borges had given at the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina a year earlier, in 1970. I learned that the lecture had been recorded, and was able to borrow the tape. This was a coup, since the lecture included most of the information I was trying to obtain from Borges. It could be considered a recapitulation of his long friendship with the Kabbalah, and although several years later, in 1977, he repeated this lecture in a series of seven talks on various subjects given in Buenos Aires, eventually publishing them in a volume entitled *Siete noches*,² I believe that the 1970 version more accurately captures Borges' fascination with his subject. It is a more intimate and focused meditation on the Kabbalah.

When I asked Borges his permission to transcribe his talk for the purpose of publishing it, he replied: "Of course, but since that is only an improvised talk, we'll have to work on it to turn it into a written text." I

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was, of course, delighted. He then suggested that we meet at the library that afternoon, and after the first session of about two hours, we met for two additional conversations, one of them on a Sunday morning.

That day I awaited him at the entrance of the building, since the library was closed. When the porter saw him approaching, groping with his cane, he opened the door. We worked morning and afternoon to finish the job, with a break for lunch at a Basque restaurant on the corner of Mexico Street where the library is located. Working with Borges was a moving experience. I would read him a paragraph, and he would then repeat the same paragraph to himself. I could see his lips moving voicelessly, sometimes two or three times, until he found a satisfactory formulation which he then dictated to me. Full paragraphs were suppressed, sentences shortened, expanded, rephrased, or reordered; words were changed; names and titles were clarified; blunt colloquialisms were eliminated; and the syntax was tightened. And yet the text preserved the tone and inflections of his voice, which, in turn, I strove to keep in my translation.

After translating Borges' lecture into English, I realized that in my recorded interview there were a few gems omitted in the lecture or in any other published material on the subject. Three important points came to light. The first concerns his discovery of the Kabbalah. Borges intimated that the earliest references to the Kabbalah he came across were in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Of the first, he said:

“I found it in Longfellow's translation of the *Divine Comedy* which he undertook during the Civil War to avoid thinking about a war he was too preoccupied with. There is a three-page appendix in that translation that Longfellow took from a book – I believe it was *Rabbinical Literature* – by J.P. Stehelin³ where there is a discussion of the Hebrew alphabet and of the different meanings and values that the Kabbalists attributed to those letters. And the other reference must have come from the *Britannica*. As a youngster, I used to come here, to the Library, quite frequently, and since I was very shy and didn't dare ask the librarian for books, I would take a volume of the *Britannica*, any volume, from the shelf myself. Since they were readily accessible in the reading room, I did not have to request the assistance of any librarian, so I would take a volume and read it. But the old *Encyclopedia Britannica* was far superior to the more recent editions. It used to be a reading work, and now it has been turned into a reference book. I remember one afternoon, one

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evening, I felt very happy because I read articles on . . . [pause], wait, on *Druids*, *Druses*, and then it came – the article on *Dryden*.”

His second comment was a reaction to a reference I had made to Scholem’s book *The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*: “Yes, I have it. I consider Scholem a friend of mine and I think he considers me his friend, although we must have seen each other no more than eight hours in our lifetime . . . But since I have read him and reread him so much . . .” Then I asked him if he had seen Scholem during his second trip to Israel, in 1971, to receive the Jerusalem Prize, and he replied:

When I was asked in Israel what I wanted to see, I said: Don’t ask me what I want to see because I am blind, but if you ask me whom I want to see I’ll answer, right away, Scholem. I spent a beautiful afternoon in his house. We met a couple of times. A charming person. He speaks perfect English.

To my question about the possible reasons for his attraction toward the Kabbalah, he answered:

Dante, referring to Virgil, says *il lungo studio e il grande amore*, I think, my Italian is not to be trusted; in my case, I cannot talk about a *long love*, but I can certainly talk about a *long study* of the Kabbalah, because that study was real. Regarding my inclination toward that study, it has – I think – a double source. To begin with, all things Jewish have always fascinated me and I think this was due to the fact that my maternal grandmother was a Protestant – an Anglican. She knew her Bible, so much so that if somebody quoted a verse, any verse, she would reply: yes, *Job*, such and such chapter and verse, or *Kings*, such and such chapter and verse. So that there was that side. And then, since I have not been able to believe in a personal God, the idea of a vast and impersonal God, the *En-Sof* of the Kabbalah, has always fascinated me. Later on, I have found the same, well, in Spinoza, and in pantheism in general, and also in Schopenhauer, and in Samuel Butler, and in Bernard Shaw’s idea of “Life’s force,” and Bergson’s “*élan vital*.” All that responded to the same attraction. There is, in addition, a more circumstantial factor. The first book I read in German, when I was studying German by myself, around 1916, was Meyrink’s novel, *Der Golem*. I was sent on the study of German by my reading of Carlyle whom I greatly admired then. (Now I find his style more intimidating than persuasive.) I started by the same foolish thing many people

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do, by trying to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in German, a book not even Germans understand, and which very few people comprehend. Then a friend of mine – what was her name? – she was a baroness from Prague, wait, oh yes, Baroness Forschtübbler she told me that a very interesting book had just been published, a fantastic novel entitled *Der Golem* (1916). I had never heard that word before. That was the first book in German I read through – the first book in prose, since I had earlier read Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*.

Almost ten years later, when Borges was at M.I.T. in April 1980, I posed a similar question: What does the Kabbalah mean to you? His answer: "I suppose the Kabbalah means much to me since I think I come of Jewish stock. My mother's name was Acevedo, and another member in her family was Pinedo. Those are Sephardic Jews. But also I find a very interesting idea in the Kabbalah, an idea found also in Carlyle and Leon Bloy. It is the idea that the whole world is merely a system of symbols, that the whole world, including the stars, stood for God's secret writing. That idea is to be found in the Kabbalah, and I think that that may be my chief attraction to it."⁴

To grasp fully the intrinsic affinities between Borges and the Kabbalah, one has only to go over his lecture included in this volume, since what he said there summarizes *his own* essential understanding of the Kabbalah. This understanding, having close links with his own writing, provides a more substantial explanation of his attraction to the world of the Kabbalists. Borges was less impressed by their doctrine, which he felt was Neo-Platonism in Kabbalistic dress, than by the symbols which suggest that doctrine. A similar and deliberate gap is found in his own writings. As much as Borges sought to write fiction with philosophical theories and theological doctrine, he knew all along that the symbols he coined in his tales and poems were by far richer than the ideas that motivated them.

He has often referred to his own stories as "woven symbols" – as metaphors capable of several meanings. He has also spoken of the reader's right to his or her own interpretation of a given text, and of the resulting layers of meaning – often not intended by the writer – added to that text. Literature is thus understood as a multilayered text each writer reads, reinterprets, and rewrites. This conception of literature immediately brings to mind the Kabbalists' perception of the Scripture as an inexhaustible well or as a face enveloped in seventy veils (a number standing for infinity); the bottom can never be reached, the face can never be seen. More recently, Roland Barthes has suggested a literary

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analogy that bears a striking resemblance to the Kabbalistic model. “The problem of style” – says he – “can only be treated by reference to what I shall refer to as the ‘layeredness’ (*feuilleton*) of the discourse. If up until now we have looked at the text as a kind of fruit with a kernel, the flesh being the form and the pit being the content, it would be more conducive to see it as an onion, a construction of layers whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes – which envelop nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces.”⁵

When Borges says that in his stories “he narrates events as if he did not wholly understand them,”⁶ (a device he learned from the Icelandic sagas), he is echoing a strategy adopted by the Kabbalists in their writings. They forged symbols whose ultimate meanings were hinted at but never totally disclosed. “The texts of the Kabbalah” – says Borges in his lecture – “seek the reader’s cooperation and were addressed to a reader who did not take them literally but instead strove to discover by himself their hidden meaning.” Could the same be said about Borges’ short stories? I believe so. It is this Kabbalistic texture in his fiction which warrants, in turn, a Kabbalistic reading of sorts. When asked to comment on a contemporary author he had not read, he replied: “Why should the fact that I was born in this century determine my literary preferences when I have thirty centuries to choose from?” Thus, the notion of novelty gives way to the idea of literature as a timeless text. In spite of the innovations in their understanding of Jewish orthodoxy, the Kabbalists sought very hard to find support for their views and theories in the authority of tradition. Borges underlines this effort in his lecture: “The Kabbalists arrived at a doctrine which was very different from the Jewish orthodoxy, but they did not want to appear as innovators because such condition would have discredited them.” Then he goes on to explain that this attitude prevailed in Western literature until the Renaissance: “Today we enjoy knowing that an idea is new, but during the Middle Ages and through the Renaissance the idea of novelty was a displeasing one, and it was thought of as something arbitrary because essential things were already discovered.” Writing as a creative act meant imitating the classics, rewriting or reinterpreting what was already written. Following that same line of thought, Borges has insisted, in an almost boastful way, that what he has written had already been written by others. In fact, one can say that his reliance on previous authors, and his conviction of writing as rewriting form the core of his literary credo. He himself has gone so far as to say that it is conceivable that since Homer all metaphors have already been written, and that the contemporary writer’s task is to reformulate those old metaphors. In another by

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now classic text, he has pointed out that “one literature differs from another not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read.”⁷ The Kabbalists would have subscribed to that Borgesian notion: they generated a full library by reading the Scripture anew.

By its Neo-Platonic nature, the Kabbalah was very dear to Borges’ attraction to philosophical idealism. There are countless texts in which he posits the old notion that people and the world in which they live are but somebody’s dream, that we are mere simulacra of a cosmic consciousness that is thinking us. In his lecture, Borges has pointed out that for “the Kabbalists, we – all the people who inhabit this planet – are only reflections of the archetypal or primordial man, *Adam Kadmon*.” This idea pervades a large portion of his poetry, fiction, and essays. Borges has said that “the generic can be more intense than the concrete and immediate,”⁸ and this has been a sort of cornerstone in his fiction: his stories are permeated by the feeling that behind the narrated actions, Platonic notions throb through as the generating force that puts in motion the machinery of plot.

The other essays included here, albeit not directly addressed to the subject of the leading article, are not impervious to its implications, perhaps because – as Harold Bloom has pointed out – “the Kabbalah offers both a model for the process of poetic influence and maps for the problematic pathways of interpretation.” I found that several of the pathways charted by Bloom in his book, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, lead Borges to similar conclusions regarding the nature of the literary act. At the center of Bloom’s elucidation there stands the principle of *Sefirotic* emanation, which in terms of literary criticism he explains as “the Gnostic formulation that all reading, and all writing, constitute a kind of defensive warfare, that reading is mis-writing and writing is mis-reading.”⁹ How does this process of poetic influence manifest itself? Bloom answers with the assistance of the sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalist Moses Cordovero, whose theosophic doctrine centers on the configurations of the *Sefiroth*. “The first of the six aspects in any *Sefirath* is its hidden aspect before it is manifested in the preceding *Sefirath*. This is to say, in literary terms, that the initial trope or image in any new poem is closely related to the *hidden presence* of the new poem in its precursor poem.”¹⁰ The precursor text – concludes Bloom – is in the new text, not so much in the letter as in the spirit. The old can be detected in the new less in the manifest than in the hidden: “Only weak poems, or the weaker elements in strong poems, immediately echo precursor poems, or directly allude to them. The fundamental phenomena of poetic influence have little to do with the borrowing of images or ideas, with sound patterns, or with other verbal reminders of one poem by another. A poem is a deep

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misprision of a previous poem when we recognize the later poem as being absent rather than present on the surface of the earlier poem, and yet still being *in* the earlier poem, implicit or hidden *in* it, not yet manifest, and yet *there* . . . Take the descendents of Shelley among the major Victorian and modern poets: Browning, Swinburne, Hardy and Yeats. All four of these strong poets have styles almost totally antithetical to Shelley's style, yet he is the crucial precursor for all of them."¹¹

Now this literary inference from the *Sefiroth* theosophy of the Kabbalists bears a remarkable similarity to Borges' own dictum that "each writer creates his own precursors." It appears in his widely cited essay "Kafka and his Precursors," which opens with the following paragraph:

Once I planned to make a survey of Kafka's precursors. At first I thought he was as singular as the fabulous Phoenix; when I knew him better I thought I recognized his voice, or his habits, in the texts of various literatures and various ages. I shall record a few of them here, in chronological order.¹²

Examples from Zeno, Han Yu, Kierkegaard, Browning, Léon Bloy, and Lord Dunsany follow. In all these "precursors," Borges underlines the fact that "the affinity is not of form but rather of tone," and although his conclusion – "Kafka's idiosyncrasy, in greater or lesser degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist"¹³ – slightly departs from Bloom's conclusion, it restates Scholem's observation regarding the "relationships of radiation between the *Sefiroth* and their reciprocal influence," a process, says Scholem, that "is not a one-way influx from cause to effect, but also from effect to cause, dialectically turning the effect into a cause."¹⁴ And, in the same way, Bloom concludes that "Cordovero's theosophical cycle becomes a wheel of images, or tropes, or defenses, by which one text constantly conducts interchange with another."¹⁵ Borges closes his essay with this remark: "The poem 'Fears and Scruples' by Robert Browning is like a prophecy of Kafka's stories, but our reading of Kafka refines and changes our reading of the poem perceptibly. The word 'precursor' is indispensable in the vocabulary of criticism, but one should try to purify it from all connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."¹⁶

I have tried to apply this Kabbalistic dialectic to Borges' own writings. Thus in the chapter devoted to *A Universal History of Infamy*, I studied his early narrative prose assuming that in each piece included in that collection "Borges' idiosyncrasy is present in greater or lesser degree," but bearing in mind, at the same time, that "if Borges had not written *Ficciones* we would not perceive it, that is to say, it wouldn't exist." The

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principle of “relationships of radiation” is applied here within the work of a single author.

It will be too prolix to justify whatever Kabbalistic premise was at work in each of the chapters of this volume. What truly matters, I feel, is that aspects of Borges’ work such as the mechanics of his prose fiction style, the structuring principle of his short stories, the extent of his influence on contemporary Latin American fiction, the *modus operandi* of his essays, the new developments of his poetry, and others which heretofore have not received the attention they deserve, are dealt with as layers of a text constantly seeking to be unraveled – “misread” Bloom would say, “reread” says Borges, “read between the lines” suggests the *Zohar*. Ultimately, the hermeneutics of the Kabbalists is not different from any other method for reading a literary text: there is a literal meaning laid at its surface, and there are underlying meanings beneath that outer one. The Kabbalists sought to reach those other levels, urged on by the same endeavor that motivates a student of literature to the business of criticism: to expand our understanding of a given text. It matters not if the Kabbalists strove to read the Holy Text “in accordance with another arrangement of the letters.” One is a mystical reading and the other a secular one, but both are attempts at understanding texts beyond their immediacy. In the end, the Kabbalah – not as an esoteric doctrine but as a method for demonstrating its doctrine – is, within its own premises and theosophic purposes, a rigorous method of literary criticism. Borges, conversely, has often posited a literary pantheism that recalls the omniscient text of the Kabbalists. In “The Flower of Coleridge,” he quotes Emerson, assuming his voice: “I am very much struck in literature by the appearance that one person wrote all the books . . . there is such equality and identity both of judgment and point of view in the narrative that it is plainly the work of one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman.”¹⁷ If literature as a whole presents a unity similar to the “profound unity of the Word,” and if to write is to rewrite that single text, to read can only be the process through which that single text can be interpreted or reinterpreted, as the Kabbalists thought of the Scriptures, infinitely. “Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*,” is the ultimate metaphor for this conviction: when Menard undertakes to write a contemporary *Quixote* in this century, he rewrites Cervantes’ text only to realize that although Cervantes’ and his own are identical, Menard’s *is almost infinitely richer*.

NOTES

- 1 “‘El Golem’ de J. L. Borges,” in *Homenaje a Joaquín Casaldauero*, ed. R. P. Sigle and G. Sobejano (Madrid: Gredos, 1972), pp. 9–19.
- 2 *Siete noches* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980).