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

Jaime Alazraki

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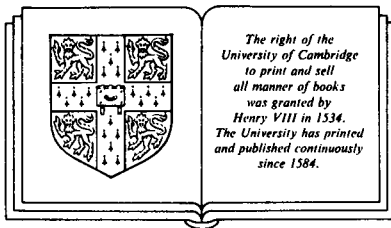
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Abbreviations

- A** *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969* (edited and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970.
- BIB** *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (translated by N. T. di Giovanni in collaboration with the author). New York: Avon Books, 1970.
- C** *La cifra*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981.
- D** *Discusión*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1964.
- DBR** *Doctor Brodie's Report* (translated by N. T. di Giovanni in collaboration with the author). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972.
- DT** *Dreamtigers* (translated by M. Boyer and H. Morland). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- ES** *Elogio de la sombra*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969.
- F** *Ficciones* (edited by A. Kerrigan). New York: Grove Press, 1962.
- GT** *The Gold of the Tigers* (translated by Alastair Reid). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977.
- HE** *Historia de la eternidad*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1961.
- HN** *Historia de la noche*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1977.
- HU** *Historia universal de la infamia*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1962.
- I** *Inquisiciones*. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925.
- IA** *El idioma de los argentinos*. Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1928.
- L** *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby). New York: New Directions, 1964.
- MEP** *Modern European Poetry* (edited by W. Barnstone et al.). New York: Bantam, 1978.

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- MH* *La moneda de hierro*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976.
- OI* *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952* (translated by Ruth L. C. Simms). New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.
- OM* *El otro, el mismo*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969.
- OP* *Obra poética*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1967.
- OT* *El oro de los tigres*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972.
- PA* *A Personal Anthology* (edited by A. Kerrigan). New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- PD* *In Praise of Darkness* (translated by N. T. di Giovanni in collaboration with the author). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974.
- RP* *La Rosa profunda*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975.
- SP* *Selected Poems 1923–1967* (edited by N. T. di Giovanni). De-lacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1972.
- UH* *A Universal History of Infamy* (translated by N. T. di Giovanni). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979.

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Preface

Why is this book different from all previous books on Borges? In dealing with an author whose critical bibliography has grown to overwhelming proportions, it seems fit to raise the question. Borges not only invites commentary and rumination, he provokes tautology. We all, his readers, search and strive for some unturned stone, for an undiscovered pearl waiting, iridescent – that is, full of new insights – at the bottom of some recondite line, on the reverse of an overlooked ambiguity, in the elusive meaning subtly intimated between the lines. Borges has turned us all into inquisitive Kabbalists. Carried away by this enthralling exercise, we fail to notice the obvious: that the said discovery has already been recorded, and that if we only care to look for it in some concealed corner of the Library, we will find it. There are at least a good half-dozen general introductions to Borges in English alone. I am the author of one of them. Some are more concise than others, some are more detailed and at times prolix, but all aim at giving an overall picture, a comprehensive survey of his writings. I see nothing wrong with that. There is always the possibility of a new twist, of an unexpected nuance in the way of presenting the same stories, poems or essays, but in justifying the place and the necessity for a new collection of essays on Borges' work, I feel compelled to point out the differences underlying this collection vis-à-vis those already in existence.

Although this is not a survey of Borges' writings, it could be described as an introduction to key aspects of Borges' oeuvre. The distinction, far from gratuitous, is worth emphasizing. None of the essays included here were intended as summaries or inventories of previous scholarship. Quite the contrary. Each one grew out of a glaring vacuum in a given area of research. The question of Borges and the Kabbalah, for example. When I published my essays on this topic in 1971 and 1972 respectively,

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Rabi's note included in the 1964 mammoth issue of "Cahiers de l'Herne" was the only reference available on this fundamental subject. In addition to being written in French, it did not assume the implications, let alone the consequences, of Borges' acquaintance with the Kabbalah in his fiction. I felt that this was an inexcusable gap. My years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, between 1958 and 1962, and the study of the Kabbalah I undertook there with Professors Gershom Scholem and J. Tishby gave me the necessary tools to tackle the question of Borges and the Kabbalah. By a happy coincidence, my training in this area coincided with Borges' own sources of information. The next step was to map the presence of those sources in his writings as a preliminary move towards a more challenging end: to establish and study the avenues the Kabbalah opened into his fiction. If the outlook and the methods of the Kabbalah permeated Borges' narratives, what roles do they play and how were they integrated into the fictive fabric? My two essays on this subject seek to answer those questions.

In the next section dealing with his fiction, I addressed myself to one of the most neglected and vexing aspects of study, namely the question of code: the formalistic devices by means of which messages are conveyed. Borges has been repeatedly praised as a master of language. Most contemporary Spanish American writers, from Julio Cortázar to Garcia Márquez, have acknowledged their linguistic debt to Borges. Cortázar best defined the extent and nature of that debt in a 1978 interview: "The great lesson Borges taught us was neither a lesson in themes nor in contents or techniques. It was a lesson in writing, an attitude. The attitude of a man who, when writing a sentence, has very carefully thought not which adjective to add, but which one to suppress. Later on he fell into the trap of using, in a rather displayful way, a single adjective in order to dazzle the reader, thus turning the effective trick into a defect. But originally, Borges attitude towards the written page was the attitude of a Mallarmé: of extreme rigor and precision."¹

Borges' early critics noticed, likewise, his masterful prose. Amado Alonso put this perception of Borges' style in a lapidary phrase when he wrote in 1935: "Nobody like Borges has created among us a style so style."² My book of 1968, and its subsequent new editions of 1974 and 1983 – *La prosa narrativa de J.L. Borges* – was an effort to demonstrate the soundness of that assertion. In the essay on "Borges, or Style as an Invisible Worker" I offer a synopsis of some of my findings. My understanding of style is concerned with language in relation to other levels of literary meaning. Deviance from the norm as the criterion for style analysis has been replaced by the particular vision governing the production of the text. This vision appears embodied in a theme or motif or, in more general terms, at the semantic level of the work, and it is also expressed

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through other components integrated in that text. Style is measured by its role and participation in the realization of that vision and not merely by its linguistic deviance from a norm. This new criterion enables the analyst to account for elements of style that may be normative – and therefore innocuous according to the old criterion – which are nevertheless relevant in the performance of a stylistic function. We have come full circle to the concept of style postulated earlier by the Russian formalists who emphasized the close correlation between stylistics and thematics in literary studies. V. V. Vinogradov repeatedly insisted upon the internal unity of literary composition and on the systematic nature of a text, in which style is but one wheel more joining the others in the conveyance of literary messages. He underlined “the functional and immanent study of style,” meaning style in its relation to a given literary vision as well as to other textual elements. In his study of Gogol’s *Overcoat*, Boris Eikhenbaum pointed out that the rhythm of the sentences finds an immediate echo in the analysis of themes. In a later work devoted to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, Eikhenbaum studied the frequency of oxymoronic constructions in her poetry and concluded that this stylistic figure becomes also the dominant principle at every level of her work: subject, composition, and of course language.

In my essay on *A Universal History of Infamy*, I tried to show that the use of oxymora in Borges’ early narratives responds to his literary vision of infamy as a travestied form of heroism. This parodic approach to his theme engages style as well as other elements of the literary code. Since infamy as theme or motif is not new in Borges’ fiction, I begin by defining the peculiar treatment of the theme in this collection. The burlesque approach to his theme is expressed, in stylistic terms, through the use of oxymoron, hypallage, and litotes; and the fact that these stories are summaries of books by other authors has its stylistic counterpart in the use of metonymy, which, like Borges’ adopted narrative strategy, condenses the whole in one of its attributes. For the purpose of my analysis, I chose from a multiplicity of stylistic devices those that – following the Jakobsonian concept of the *dominant* – “specify the work and guarantee the integrity of the structure.”³

In the last essay of this section, I present what could be described as my discourse on method for the study of compositional patterns in Borges’ stories. It was first published as the opening chapter of my book *Versiones, inversiones, reversiones* of 1977, a study of mirror as the structural principle underlying Borges’ narratives. My point of departure was a comment made by Paul de Man in his pioneering essay “A Modern Master” of 1964, where he wrote: “All his stories have a similar mirror-like structure, although the devices vary with diabolical ingenuity.”⁴

Until the publication of my book in 1977, very little was added to de

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Man's insightful essay. My piece on "The South" intends to show that structure, far from being an arbitrary skeleton supporting meaning, becomes a configuration of meaning. Juan Dahlmann's dilemma – to fight or not to fight – reaches its true resolution at the symmetrical disposition of the narrative material. Structure – the organization of the fable into a form or signifier – supplies a forceful answer to the problem presented at the level of message or signified. Like mirrors whose images invert and revert the reflected object, structure functions in Borges' stories as a metacommentary which modifies or reinforces a given conflict presented as plot.

The third part is devoted to poetry. In spite of the fact that Borges' poetry far exceeds, in volume as well as in scope, his narrative production, very little has been said, in English at least, of this segment of his work. For several critics Borges is above all a poet. His first book, published in 1923 – *Fervor of Buenos Aires* – was a collection of poems, and so was his last, *The Conjurors* of 1985. He himself has confirmed this assessment: "First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader, then as a poet, then as a prose writer."⁵ Now that he is dead and the corpus of his writings is enclosed in the boundaries that finality provides, it is clear that his poetry outweighs his fiction, not only in size – twelve collections of poems as opposed to five volumes of short stories – but also in value. His fiction – as he himself put it – is the work of "a man who has tried to explore the literary possibilities of metaphysics and of religion."⁶ His poetry, on the other hand, gives expression to a more personal and intimate human being. As time recedes from his highly intellectualized stories, it also moves towards his more private and confidential poetry. Borges must have felt all along the distance separating one genre from the other. Anticipating the ultimate fate of his own work, he wrote in 1971: "My stories are, in a sense, outside of me. I dream them, shape them, and set them down; after that, once sent out into the world, they belong to others. All that is personal to me, all that my friends good-naturedly tolerate in me – my likes and dislikes, my hobbies, my habits – are to be found in my verse. In the long run, perhaps, I shall stand or fall by my poems."⁷

It took a symposium exclusively devoted to Borges' poetry – held at Dickinson College in 1983 with the presence of Borges himself – to refocus critical attention on his poetry. The volume *Borges the Poet* (1986) resulted from this gathering. My essay "Enumerations as Evocations" was originally read at that conference. It is a study of enumerations as a literary device in Borges' late poetry. It takes into account the Whitmanesque use of this contrivance to then establish Borges' peculiar handling of it. In Whitman's poetry, according to Leo Spitzer, enumerations

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render that oriental bazaar of our unordered civilization into the powerful Ego, the “I” of the poet who has extricated himself from the chaos. In Borges, on the other hand, enumerations avoid this condition of catalogues to become metonymic contractions, indexes, of previous themes and motifs elaborately sung in earlier poetry.

Between 1969 and 1981 Borges published six full-fledged collections of poetry: *In Praise of Darkness* (1969), *The Gold of the Tigers* (1972), *The Unending Rose* (1975), *The Iron Coin* (1976), *A History of the Night* (1977), and *The Cipher* (1981). Thus he more than surpassed in twelve years his forty-four previous years of poetic output between 1923 (*Fervor of Buenos Aires*) and 1967, when the last edition of his *Poetic Work* was published. Between these two cycles, the changes in his poetry are not limited to the sheer volume of production – sparse and alternating with other genres in the first, intense and almost exclusive in the second – but also include innovations in theme and in form. His blindness is only part of the story (Borges acknowledged that rhythm and meter make the poem a more accessible endeavor for a blind person). With age, Borges became more attracted and attuned to the expressive possibilities of poetry. As he left behind his recalcitrant diffidence and his epic sense of life, his poetry became more introspective and even confessional. One of the most conspicuous changes is precisely this urgent desire for intimacy. If the early Borges understood poetry, in T. S. Eliot’s words, “not as a turning loose of emotions, but as an escape from emotions; not as the expression of personality, but as an escape from personality,” the later Borges would explore in depth a theme barely mentioned in his previous poetry, that of a man who finally leaves behind his literary persona to confront the drama of selfhood, the ravages of time, and his own poetic performance as death becomes more real than life. These are some of the questions pondered in the chapter on his more recent poetry. I particularly deal here with the effects of these thematic developments on his handling of poetry as language. As a result of a tighter balance between message and code, and due to the persistent reformulation of a few familiar themes and motifs, his poetry has gained in concentration and terseness and has achieved a verbal virtuosity more frequently associated with musical harmony.

The last essay of this group covering his poetry is devoted to mirrors. Not only as a prevailing motif in his poetry – one may say as an obsession – , not only as a mechanism that provides a model for structuring his narratives, but also as the answer of poetry to the conundrum of life and the riddle of identity: “Art should be like that mirror / which reveals to us our own face . . . It is also like the river with no end / that flows and remains . . .”⁸ The mirror to which Borges alludes in this and other

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poems is not the one that “melts away just like a bright silvery mist,”⁹ it is not even that other side of mirrors where fantasy and play reside, but the mirror art provides as the residence of the self. And if “it would destroy us to see the shape of our being,”¹⁰ as he wrote in his poem “Oedipus and the Riddle,” art provides a mirror that reflects by approximation the awesome enormity of that being. Only as such, mirrors become a metaphor of the revealing powers of poetry.

The fourth and last part of this volume covers broader aspects of his work. When I set out to write the short piece on Borges’ essays back in 1969, I was surprised to realize how little had been said on this genre even though Borges’ essays were finding their way into discriminating collections such as *Fifty Great Essays* (1964). Several commentators have noticed Borges’ paradoxical treatment of this genre, as if fiction and essay were swapping hats. John Updike was the first to underline this reversal of functions when he pointed out that “Borges’ stories have the close texture of argument; his critical articles have the suspense and tension of fiction.”¹¹ One year later (1966), the French critic Pierre Macherey restated and tried to explain the same phenomenon: “Instead of tracing the line of the story, Borges indicates its possibility, generally postponed or deferred. This is why his critical essays are fictional even when they are about actual works; and this is also why his stories are told largely for the sake of the explicit self-criticism which they embody.”¹² Spurred by these observations, I engaged the question of how his essays are made. Or, to put it differently, by what means do his essays acquire that fictive quality? My next task was to examine the compositional strategy of his essays. Does a given outlook act as a kind of prism filtering the questions under discussion?

The last two chapters deal with two general aspects of Borges’ work. The first is a discussion of Borges’ impact on contemporary Spanish American fiction. By the time I wrote this essay in 1972, Borges’ influence on American letters was being acknowledged as “the Borgesian phase of American fiction,” and a full book-length study assessed the extent of that influence on twenty years of American fiction between 1950 and 1970. On the other hand, almost nothing had been written on the debt of Spanish American fiction of the same decades to Borges with the exception of several Latin American writers themselves who had pinpointed here and there what they owe to Borges. My article on this subject was intended as a corrective to that embarrassing omission.

In my last essay on “Borges’ Modernism and the New Critical Idiom” I attempted to trace the route opened by Borges’ work in the waters of modernism. It is a bit sketchy and should be read as a preliminary step towards a more thorough examination of the subject, but it should also give the reader a clear and accurate picture of Borges’ place in and contri-

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bution to modernism. From this examination, Borges surfaces as an audacious forger of new analytic notions that have become an important part of the new critical idiom. Borges was a modern writer in spite of himself. His fiction constitutes a sizable territory on the map of modernism, and modern critical theory is – as I tried to show – in debt to him. If Roland Barthes had already written, “all of a sudden, it does not matter to me any longer not to be modern,” Borges never acknowledged his own modernity. On the contrary, he insisted on being a professed old-fashioned. Yet, with his death, modernism comes to a full close. Borges’ ahistoricism defines a ponderable dimension of it and, at the same time, opens the way to its demise. The translator of Kafka, Joyce, and Michaux was himself a translation of the preoccupations and ideas that animated modernism. Borges’ belief that literature – and all forms of intellectualization, for that matter – is above history and apart from reality brought him closer to Jung and away from Freud, closer to Schopenhauer and away from Marx, closer to Valéry and away from Surrealism, closer to Berkeley and away from Kierkegaard and existentialism. He renounced the world and left its disarrays to history. He chose, by contrast, to dwell in the Library as if it were the world. But in Latin America, history was changing life and deeply permeating its literature. One can still hear, in 1986, a latecomer repeating what Borges said in the thirties: “I write using other written texts, rather than by expressing ‘reality.’ Our reality now *is* other texts. When I read novels now they don’t seem to have anything to do with anything. Novels should be aimed at adding to cultural discourse.”¹³ Some isolated Hispanic American writers may echo Kathy Acker’s recycled version of Borges’ old belief, but most of them, and the best among them, have absorbed the lessons of modernism and integrated them into their concerns with and commitments to history. They are in debt to Borges, but their allegiance is to postmodernism; they are not the children of the universal and always reasonable Library, but the Latin American sons and daughters of an abused continent in understandable turmoil. Borges was for them a father figure they had to assume and kill at the same time.

Columbia University

J.A.

NOTES

- 1 Ernesto González Bermejo, *Conversaciones con Cortázar* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 1978), p. 21.
- 2 Amado Alonso, *Materia y forma en poesía* (Madrid: Gredos, 1960), p. 352.

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- 3 Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," in *Selected Writings*, 5 vols. (Gravnehage: Mouton, 1962–1982), vol. 3, p. 751.
- 4 Paul de Man, "A Modern Master," in Jaime Alazraki, ed., *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), p. 59.
- 5 Jorge Luis Borges, "Foreword" to *Selected Poems 1923–1967*, edited with an introduction and notes by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1972), p. xv.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. xv–xvi.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 9 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: The Modern Library), p. 218.
- 10 Jorge Luis Borges, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
- 11 John Updike, "The Author as Librarian," in Jaime Alazraki, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- 12 Pierre Macherey, "Borges and the Fictive Narrative," in Alazraki, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 80.
- 13 Kathy Acker, "In the Tradition of Cervantes, Sort of," *The New York Times Book Review*, November 30, 1986, p. 10.

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