

# Borges and the Kabbalah

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When asked a few years ago about his interest in the Kabbalah, Borges replied, "I read a book called *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* by Scholem and another book by Trachtenberg on Jewish superstitions.<sup>1</sup> Then I have read all the books on the Kabbalah I have found and all the articles in the encyclopedias and so on. But I have no Hebrew whatever."<sup>2</sup> These remarks, considering the number of interviews Borges has given, come rather late. Except for this single statement, nothing else has been added on the subject since Rabi's essay "Fascination de la Kabbale,"<sup>3</sup> and Rabi's contribution lies in his merely having called attention to Borges' familiarity with Kabbalistic texts. I shall attempt to show how far Borges' acquaintance with the Kabbalah goes beyond the few accidental tracks left in his writings as a result of his readings.

1. Borges is referring to Joshua Trachtenberg's *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York, 1939).

2. See Ronald Christ, "Jorge Luis Borges, an Interview," *The Paris Review*, 40 (Winter-Spring 1967), 162.

3. See Rabi, "Fascination de la Kabbale," *L'Herne, J. L. Borges* (Paris, 1964), pp. 265-71.

Ultimately, as André Maurois puts it, "Borges has read everything" that exists ("and all the books that don't exist," adds John Barth), and it would be unusual not to find in his prose some imprints of the material which, as is the case with the Kabbalah, exerted on his mind such an enthralling fascination.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of the Kabbalah on Borges' work far exceeds the random quotations or allusions the casual reader may find and which, after all, only confirm the interest Borges conceded above. Behind his transparent texts there lies a stylistic intricacy, a certain Kabbalistic texture, a spellbinding characteristic to which Borges finds himself attracted.

To the question, "Have you tried to make your own stories Kabbalistic?" he replied, "Yes, sometimes I have."<sup>5</sup> For the Kabbalists, as one of their classic texts shows, "every word of the Torah has six hundred thousand faces—that is, layers of meaning or entrances," and the ostensible aim of the Kabbalah seems to be to reach these profound layers. Borges' writings offer the reader a similar challenge. Most of his narratives do not exhaust themselves at the level of literal meaning—they present an immediate and manifest layer and a more oblique and allusive one. It is the latter which generates in his stories a Kabbalistic aura whose source goes far beyond a fortuitous familiarity with the Kabbalah.

### 1. A scrutiny of Borges' Kabbalah library

In "Death and the Compass," Borges examines some books on the Kabbalah from his own library. Echoing Cervantes' device,<sup>6</sup> Borges includes among the volumes of the murdered rabbi's complete

4. See J. L. Borges, "Una vindicación de la cábala," *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1957), pp. 55–60.

5. Christ, *ibid.*, p. 161.

6. As every reader of the *Quixote* knows, in Chapter VI the curate and the barber perform a thorough scrutiny of the library "of our ingenious gentleman." The scrutiny represents a critical examination of romances of chivalry and pastoral novels to whose tradition Cervantes himself contributed *La Galatea*. This book, too, falls into the hands of the scrutinizers who decide to keep it because, the curate says, "that fellow Cervantes and I have been friends these many years, but, to my knowledge, he is better versed in misfortune than he is in verses. His book has a fairly good plot; it starts out well and ends up nowhere." Borges himself has referred to the effects of this "play of mirrors" in his essay "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*."

works his own essay, "A Vindication of the Kabbalah," collected in the volume *Discusión*. Contrary to what happens in *Don Quixote*, where Cervantes' pastoral novel *La Galatea* receives from the curate a favorable although not excessively generous comment, the reference to Borges' essay in the story goes without any remark at all. However, the mere inclusion of an essay written by the same author who now writes the story produces an effect similar to the one achieved by Cervantes in the famous passage. Essentially it is the effect produced by the theater within the theater, by literature becoming the subject of literature. In this operation, Borges attains a literary magic he himself has poignantly described:

Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disquiet us to know that *Don Quixote* is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be the readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious. (OI, 46) <sup>7</sup>

Among the books that Borges attributes to Rabbi Marcelo Yarmolinsky there figures "a literal translation of the *Sefer Yetsirah*." The Book of Creation is a brief treatise on cosmologic and cosmogonic matters. It was written between the third and sixth century and represents, with the Book *Bahir* (twelfth century), the embryo out of which the bulk of the Kabbalah grew and developed. Its chief subjects are the elements of the world, which are sought in the ten elementary and primordial numbers—Sefiroth—and in the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Together these represent the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole of creation; they are the *thirty-two secret paths of wisdom*, through which God has created all that exists. In his essay "On the Cult of Books," Borges again refers to the *Sefer Yetsirah*. This time the reference is a long paragraph in which he furnishes some basic information on the book, describes its purpose and method, and brings in a quotation which may or may not be taken directly from the text, since this is the most widely cited passage of the Book of Creation

7. I have further discussed the effects of this device in *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid, 1968), pp. 87-88.

and Borges might well have found it in the books and articles he read on the subject: "Twenty-two fundamental letters: God drew them, engraved them, combined them, weighed them, permuted them, and with them produced everything that is and everything that will be." At any rate, the long reference is an indication that the inclusion of this title in Yarmolinsky's bibliography is as important with regard to the murdered Talmudist as it is with respect to Borges' own interest in the Kabbalah. It shows also, however, that the aura of fantasy created by those enigmatic and often esoteric books springs, rather than from Borges' intention, from the reader's unfamiliarity with these works and authors, although Borges—undoubtedly—is aware of their puzzling impact on the reader.<sup>8</sup> The same holds true for the other books mentioned in the list. Thus the *History of the Hasidic Sect* and the *Biography of the Baal Shem*, attributed to Yarmolinsky, are slightly modified versions of two works by Martin Buber: *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*<sup>9</sup> and *The Legend of Baal Shem*.<sup>10</sup> Borges' acquaintance with Buber becomes apparent in the story "The Sect of the Phoenix," where he quotes him, and in the essay "On Chesterton," where he directs the reader to Buber's classic *Tales of the Hasidim*.<sup>11</sup>

The last book mentioned in the list, *A Study of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*, although not directly concerned with the Kabbalah, is not foreign to its doctrine. Several of Fludd's (1574–1637) postulates are amazingly close to those of the Kabbalah. The English Rosicrucian maintained that the universe proceeds from, and will return to, God; that the act of creation is the separation of the active principle (light) from the passive (darkness) in

8. The last sentence was written before the appearance of *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York, 1970). There Borges provides, for the first time, some enlightening "commentaries" on the background of the short stories collected in that volume. On "Death and the Compass," he says: "No apology is needed for repeated mention of the Kabbalah, 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" (A, 269).

9. Although this book was published in English in 1960, it collects essays published (1927) in Buber's *Die chassidischen Bücher* and his *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (1921).

10. The German edition dates from 1907.

11. There may be other references to Buber that I have overlooked.

the bosom of the divine unity (God); and that the universe consists of three worlds: the archetypal (God), the macrocosm (the world), and the microcosm (man). He was a follower of Paracelsus, whose prescriptions for the making of the homunculus bear astonishing similarities to the golem-making formulae of the Kabbalists.<sup>12</sup>

Lönnrot, the “pure logician” of “Death and the Compass,” carries these books off to his apartment, “suddenly turning bibliophile and Hebraic scholar” (*A*, 67). Borges could as well have said “Kabbalist,” since Lönnrot attempts to solve the mysteries of the seemingly ritualistic murders in the same manner that a Kabbalist deciphers the occult mysteries of the Scripture. The arithmetic value of the dates of the murders and their geometric location on the map become important and revealing. Before Lönnrot can establish these symmetries in time and space, he devotes himself to perusing Yarmolinsky’s books. Borges does not miss the chance to unfold his erudition on the subject. Thus, one book revealed to the investigator “the doctrine that God has a secret name in which . . . His ninth attribute, Eternity, may be found—that is to say, the immediate knowledge of everything under the sun that will be, that is, and that was” (*A*, 68). The ninth attribute mentioned in the story takes us to the very core of the Kabbalah’s cosmogony—the theory of the *Sefiroth*.

## 2. The doctrine of the *Sefiroth*

Borges’ first explorations into the subject of the Kabbalah are found in his second collection of essays, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (The Extent of My Hope), published in 1926. There, in an article entitled “A History of Angels,” Borges leaves a testimony to his first readings on the Kabbalah. He mentions two books, Erich Bischoff’s *Die Elemente der Kabbalah* (1914) and *Rabbinical Literature* by Stehelin; even more important is the fact that the passage contains the germ of his more mature essay, “A Vindication of the Kabbalah,” of 1931. Yet it is in the earlier article, “A History of Angels,” where he writes literally about the theory of the *Sefiroth*.

12. For further information on this subject, see Scholem’s *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, 1969), pp. 197–98.

Relying on Bischoff and Stehelin, Borges explains that "to each one of the ten *Sefiroth*, or eternal emanations of the godhead, corresponds a region of heaven, one of the names of God, one commandment of the decalogue, a part of the human body, and a class of angels." He adds that Stehelin "links the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet to these ten heavenly worlds. Thus the letter Aleph looks toward the brain, the first commandment, the heaven of fire, the second name 'I Am That I Am,' and the seraphim called Holy Beasts." <sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most direct bearing the doctrine of the *Sefiroth* has on Borges' work emerges in the story "The Aleph." The theory of the *Sefiroth* postulates that there are two worlds and that both represent God. "First a primary world, the most deeply hidden of all, which remains insensible and unintelligible to all but God, the world of *En-Sof* (Infinite); and secondly, one joined unto the first, which makes it possible to know God, the world of attributes." <sup>14</sup> The ninth *Sefirah*, as pointed out by Borges, is the source from which the divine life overflows in the act of mystical procreation. The world of *Sefiroth* is described as a mystical organism, and the most important images used in this connection are those of the tree and of a man. This tree is the unknown and unknowable God, but it is also the skeleton of the universe—it grows throughout the whole of creation and spreads its branches through all its ramifications. All mundane and created things exist only because something of the power of the *Sefiroth* lives and acts in them.<sup>15</sup> This notion of God's externalization is summarized in a passage of the *Zohar* (Book of Splendor): "The process of creation has taken place on two planes, one above and one below, and for this reason the Torah begins with the letter Beth, the numerical value of which is two. The lower occurrence corresponds to the higher; one produced the upper world (of the *Sefiroth*), the other the nether world (of the visible creation)." <sup>16</sup> The pantheistic character of this outlook comes openly to the surface in the Spanish Kabbalist Joseph

13. J. L. Borges, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (Buenos Aires, 1926), p. 67.

14. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1961), p. 208.

15. For comprehensive information on the *Zohar*, see Chapters V-VI in Scholem's *Major Trends*.

16. Scholem, *ibid.*, p. 222.

Gikatila's formula, "He fills everything and He is everything." The theogony of the *Sefiroth* and the cosmogony of creation represent two aspects of the same act. "Creation," says Scholem, "mirrors the inner movement of the divine life. . . . It is nothing but an external development of those forces which are active and alive in God Himself. . . . The life of the Creator pulsates in that of his creatures."<sup>17</sup> The last assertion does not differ, even in its formulation, from Borges' own pantheistic formula, "Every man is an organ put forth by the divinity in order to perceive the world" ("The Theologians," *L*, 124).<sup>18</sup>

The Kabbalistic notion that conceives the Torah as a vast *corpus symbolicum*, representative of that hidden life within God which the theory of the *Sefiroth* attempts to describe, is paraphrased in Léon Bloy's *L'Ame de Napoléon* (as quoted by Borges in his essay "The Mirror of the Enigmas"): "History is an immense liturgical text, where the *i*'s and the periods are not worth less than whole verses or chapters, but the importance of both is undeterminable and is profoundly hidden. . . . Everything is a symbol." Borges' own comments underline the affinity between Bloy and the Kabbalah:

**Bloy . . . did nothing but apply to the whole Creation the method that the Jewish cabalists applied to the Scripture. They thought that a work dictated by the Holy Spirit was an absolute text: a text where the collaboration of chance is calculable at zero.<sup>19</sup> The portentous premise of a book that is impervious to contingency, a book that is a mechanism of infinite purposes, moved them to permute the scriptural words, to sum up the numerical value of the letters, to consider their form, to observe the small letters and the capital letters, to search for acrostics and anagrams. . . .** (*OI*, 128)

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 223–24.

18. This is not the place to elaborate on Borges' fertile use of pantheism in his fiction. I have treated this aspect of his work in my book *La prosa narrativa de J. L. Borges*, pp. 60–73. Here it will suffice to observe that the pantheistic notion that frames several of his stories stems from Plotinus, Spinoza, Sufism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other sources, as well as from the doctrines of the Kabbalah. In some instances, Borges' contacts with the Kabbalah are indirectly established through authors who in one way or another echo Kabbalistic theories. Thus the world of *Sefiroth*, as described above, is found in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, but now the theosophic symbols "tree" and "man" are replaced by the image of a book: "God offered us two books," writes Borges quoting Bacon, "so that we would not fall into error. The first, the volume of the Scriptures, reveals His will; the second, the volume of the creatures, reveals His power" (*OI*, 119).

19. The seed of this idea is already found in "A History of Angels," and is literally reproduced in "Una vindicación de la cábala."

For the Kabbalists, the letters of the Torah are the mystical body of God, and from this it follows that the Creation is just a reflection or emanation of the Holy text; hence the Midrash "God looked into the Torah and created the world," and the story told in the Mishnah about a scribe (of the Scripture) who, when asked about his occupation, received from his teacher the following advice: "My son, be careful in your work, for it is the work of God; if you omit a single letter, or write a letter too many, you will destroy the whole world. . . ." <sup>20</sup> The whole idea is put in a nutshell in the Kabbalistic axiom: "What is below is above and what is inside is outside," <sup>21</sup> from which the *Sefer Yetsirah* infers that "on the basis of the lower world we understand the secret law according to which the upper world is governed." The Kabbalist Menahem Recanati adds his own exegesis to the axiom: "All created being, earthly man and all other creatures in this world, exist according to the archetype (*dugma*) of the ten *sefiroth*." <sup>22</sup> The text that best shows the spell of the *Sefiroth* on Borges is a passage from his story "The Theologians," in which he gives in a condensed formula the pantheistic essentials of the theory. "In the hermetic books," he says, "it is written that what is down below is equal to what is on high, and what is on high is equal to what is down below; in the *Zohar*, that the higher world is a reflection of the lower" (*L*, 123). From this Borges derives one of his favorite motifs—"every man is two men"—which has ingenious and fertile effects on his narratives.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. The legend of the golem

Borges' debt to Gershom Scholem is acknowledged in a couplet from his poem "The Golem": "But all these matters are discussed by Scholem / in a most learned passage of his book" (*SP*, 113). The book is Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, un-

20. Quoted by Scholem in *On the Kabbalah . . .*, p. 38.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

23. In addition to "The Theologians," the motif can be traced in the following stories: "The Shape of the Sword," "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," "Three Versions of Judas," "Story of the Warrior and the Captive," "The End," "The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," "The South," and "The Other Death."

doubtedly the most authoritative work on the subject and a model of scholarship. Borges could not have chosen better. Paradoxically, however—and this is one of the voluntarily involuntary mistakes in which Borges delights—the information for the poem does not arise from the “learned book,” *Major Trends* . . . , which hardly devotes a few lines to the question of the golem, but from other sources.<sup>24</sup> Later Borges resourcefully explained in his “Autobiographical Essay” that he twice used Scholem’s name in the poem “as the only possible rhyming word” for golem.

The poem represents one of the most felicitous expressions of a main theme in Borges’ work—the world as a dream of God. More than in a *topos* of seventeenth-century literature, Borges finds in the religions of India a new foundation for his idealist outlook on reality.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, this theme of the world as God’s dream is not motivated by only one doctrine, or “perplexity,” as Borges calls it. “The Circular Ruins,” for example, embodies the Buddhist belief in the world as the dream of Someone, or perhaps no one, but at the same time it casts in the mold of fiction the idealist notion which postulates the hallucinatory character of all reality. Borges’ avid erudition, however, does not stop at these two sources. He searches for new formulations of the same basic idea, for new versions of a same metaphor, until he arrives at a brilliantly concise assertion—“Perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors” (“Pascal’s Sphere,” *OI*, 6). Therefore, it would be mistaken to point to one source as the motivation of the poem or the story, or to single out one exclusive intonation of a metaphor as the only “perplexity” Borges intends to reinterpret in his fiction. One of the enchanting features of Borges’ art is precisely the combination of very diverse constituents, the blending of various intonations into one unified tone. In this process, the metaphors of history were converted into what they essentially are—into metaphors of literature.

Thus the story “The Circular Ruins,” which seems to be inspired

24. One of them was undoubtedly Gustav Meyrink’s novel *Der Golem*, which young Borges read while still a student in Geneva.

25. A concise exposition of this outlook as conceived by Eastern thought may be found in Borges’ essay “Forms of a Legend.”

by Eastern beliefs,<sup>26</sup> is no less imbued with the doctrines of the Kabbalah than the poem "The Golem." Tale and poem are variations of the same theme: a man (a magician in the story, a rabbi in the poem) dreams another man into existence, only later to find that he too, the dreamer, is but a dream. In both instances, the creative powers of man seem to be competing with the creative powers of God. In reconstructing the legend of the golem in the poem, Borges makes use of a long Kabbalistic tradition from which the legend originates. This tradition has its beginnings in an old belief according to which the cosmos was built chiefly from the twenty letters of the Hebrew alphabet as presented in the *Sefer Yetsirah* (Book of Creation). If man can learn how God went about his creation, he too will be able to create human beings. This power is already attributed, at the end of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, to Abraham, who "contemplated, meditated, and beheld, investigated and understood and outlined and dug and combined and formed [i.e. created] and he succeeded."<sup>27</sup> A Midrash from the twelfth century goes even further by stating that "when God created His world, He first created the *Sefer Yetsirah* and looked into it and from it created His world. When he had completed His work, he put it [the *Sefer Yetsirah*] into the Torah [Pentateuch] and showed it to Abraham. . . ." <sup>28</sup> The secret is therefore in the Torah, which is not only made up of the names of God, but is, as a whole, the one great Name of God, and yet no one knows its right order, for the sections of the Torah are not given in the right arrangement. If they were, everyone who reads it might create a world, raise the dead, and perform miracles. Therefore the order of the Torah was hidden and is known to God alone.<sup>29</sup> The Kabbalists strove to find that hidden order, and the tradition of the Golem goes back as far as the

26. I have discussed this in some detail in *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 53-59.

27. *Le Sepher Yetsirah*, Texte hébreu intégral, lu et commenté d'après le code originel de la Cabale par Carlo Suarès (Geneva, 1968), p. 122. I use the English translation as it appears in Gershom Scholem's *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, p. 169.

28. The Midrash is "Neue Pesikta." Quoted by Scholem, *On the Kabbalah . . .*, pp. 177-78.

29. Scholem, *ibid.*, p. 167.

prophet Jeremiah, who busied himself with the *Sefer Yetsirah* until a man was created. For the Hasidim the creation of a golem confirmed man in his likeness to God. Through Jakob Grimm's version of 1808, the legend achieved wide popularity and exerted a special fascination on authors like Gustav Meyrink, Achim von Arnim, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. This is not to say that "The Circular Ruins" is strictly an avatar of the legend, although the poem certainly is, but rather that Borges' familiarity with the legend of the Golem has impregnated his story.

The creation of a golem by man is parallel to the creation of Adam by God. As the golem is made from clay or mud, so Adam was made from the matter of the earth, literally from clay. The etymological connection between Adam and earth (Hebrew, *ADAMah*) is very much stressed in the rabbinical and Talmudic commentaries on Genesis. Furthermore, in the Aggadah (the narrative branch of the Jewish oral law), Adam is designated as *golem*, which means the unformed, amorphous. Adam was said to be golem before the breath of God had touched him; and in a Midrash from the second and third centuries, Adam is described not only as a golem, but as a golem of cosmic size and strength to whom, while he was still in this speechless and inanimate state, God showed all future generations to the end of time. It was only after the Fall that Adam's enormous size, which filled the universe, was reduced to human proportions.<sup>30</sup> "His size [explains Scholem] would seem to signify, in spatial terms, that the power of the whole universe is concentrated in him. He receives his soul only at the end of Creation."<sup>31</sup>

In describing the efforts the magician makes to dream his creature in "The Circular Ruins," Borges interpolates this digression: "In the cosmogonies of the Gnostics, the demiurges mold a red Adam who is unable to stand on his feet; as clumsy and crude and elementary as that Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams wrought by the nights of the magician" (*A*, 59). Here Borges refers to

30. On the subject of the golem, see the chapter "The Idea of the Golem" in Scholem's *On the Kabbalah . . .*, pp. 158-204.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

certain Gnostic ideas, originally of Jewish extraction, according to which "the angels of Elohim took some of the best earth and from it formed man."<sup>32</sup> As in the traditional Midrash, this Gnostic Adam did not receive his soul until God and earth joined to make it. The idea that such an act of creation might be repeated by magic or other arts represents the backbone of the Kabbalistic tradition of the golem. It is this idea which one can perceive in Borges' story.

At first glance, the kinship of story and legend is hardly noticeable; "The Circular Ruins" is the story of a magician who sets himself the task of dreaming a man to later project him into reality, but the core of its theme is revealed only in the last paragraph: the dreamer too is but a dream; the creator too is but the imperfect creation of another creator; reality as a whole is but a dream of someone or no one. Thus focused, Borges' story begins to move toward the legend of the golem. Although the magician does not shape his intended son with mud or clay, as in the legend, but dreams him, the goal is still the same—the creation of a man. Yet the magician's dreams are not treated as such—that is, as intangible material—but rather as very concrete clay, as moldable substance: "He realized that, though he may penetrate all the riddles of the higher and lower orders, the task of shaping the senseless and dizzying stuff of dreams is the hardest that a man can attempt. . . ." (Recall that "golem" means "unformed matter.") And further on: "He then swore he would forget the populous vision which in the beginning had led him astray, and he sought another method." Before taking up his task again, "he cleansed himself in the waters of the river, worshiped the gods of the planets, uttered the prescribed syllables of an all-powerful name, and slept" (*A*, 58). When Borges writes "the prescribed syllables of an all-powerful name," we may surmise that he is thinking of the *Shem Hamephorash* or Tetragrammaton, which the Kabbalists sought by combining the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Borges himself has paraphrased the Kabbalistic belief that when the miraculous *Shem Hamephorash* is pronounced over the golem made of clay or mud he must come to life: he "pronounced the Name which is the Key,"

32. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Borges wrote in the poem "The Golem" (*SP*, 111). In his essay "The Golem" he had also pointed out that golem "was the name given to the man created by combinations of letters."<sup>33</sup> In "The Circular Ruins," the magician succeeds in dreaming a beating heart only after he has uttered "the prescribed syllables of an all-powerful name."

The description of the magician's dream is also reminiscent of the process of transformations (*temuroth*) of the letters as described in *Sefer Yetsirah*. Borges writes: "On the fourteenth night he touched the pulmonary artery with a finger and then the whole heart. . . . Before a year was over he came to the skeleton, the eyelids. The countless strands of hair were perhaps the hardest task of all" (*A*, 58–59). Similarly, in the *Sefer Yetsirah*, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet correspond to different parts of the human organism. Thus the double letters (beth, gimmel, dalet, kaf, pei, reish, and taf) produced the seven planets, the seven days, and the seven apertures in man (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and one mouth). The twelve simple letters, on the other hand, created the twelve signs of the zodiac and thence the twelve months in time and the twelve "leaders" in man; the latter are those organs which perform functions in the body independent of the outside world—the hands, feet, kidneys, gall, intestines, stomach, liver, pancreas, and spleen (*Sefer Yetsirah*, IV–V). "One prescribed order of the alphabet produces a male being, another a female; a reversal of these orders turns the golem back to dust."<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Borges' magician dreams a complete man, but the dreamed being "could not stand up or speak, nor could he open his eyes." He resorts to the effigy in the destroyed temple, and the multiple god reveals to him that "its earthly name was Fire . . . and that through its magic the phantom of the man's dreams would be wakened to life in such a way that—except for Fire itself and the dreamer—every being in the world would accept him as a man of flesh and blood" (*A*, 59). In the Kabbalistic tradition, too, the act of animation comes with finding the right combination of let-

33. J. L. Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (New York, 1969), pp. 112–14.

34. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah . . .*, p. 186.

ters as prescribed in the Book of Creation, an undertaking which normally demands three years of studying the *Sefer Yetsirah*, just as it takes a thousand and one nights for Borges' magician to produce his dreamed son. In both cases, animation comes only after exercising the divine power generated by the "all-powerful name."

Borges suggests in his tale that the dreamed man himself eventually becomes a dreamer and repeats the magic operation, and so will his son, and the son of his son, and so on *ad infinitum*. The golem of the Kabbalists does not reproduce, but it may grow endlessly in size. The only way of controlling this demiurgic growth is by erasing from his forehead the first letter of the word *Emeth* (truth), which makes the word read *meth* (he is dead). Once this is done, he collapses and turns to clay again. As fire can reveal that the magician's created son is a simulacrum, so the dropping of one letter can return the golem to his previous state as dust. Borges goes further by granting the dreamed man all the qualities of human life, thus bringing the golem-maker to a status no different from that of God. In the Kabbalah, on the other hand, the golem remains at a speechless level, a kind of docile Frankenstein,<sup>35</sup> with the exception of one Kabbalistic source—the *Pseudo Saadya*, where the golem is granted soul and speech.

Before sending his created son to another temple, "the magician imbued with total oblivion his disciple's long years of apprenticeship" (*A*, 60)—an idea of deep Kabbalistic roots. The "Midrash on the Creation of the Child" relates that "after its guardian angel has given it a fillip upon the nose, the newborn child forgets all the infinite knowledge acquired before its birth in the celestial houses of learning."<sup>36</sup> In a parenthesis Borges explains that the oblivion is needed "so that the boy would never know he was a phantom, so that he would think himself a man like all men" (*A*, 60), thus integrating a seemingly bizarre and unconnected idea into the sequential "rationale" of the narrative.

The exegesis of the Midrash comes from Eleazar of Worms

35. Notice that Mary W. Shelley's creature is also a close descendant of the golem.

36. Scholem, *Major Trends . . .*, p. 92.

(1232?), one of the pillars of German Hasidism: "Why, Eleazar asks, does the child forget? Because, if it did not forget, the course of this world would drive it to madness if it thought about it in the light of what it knew."<sup>37</sup> So no matter how different the two explanations may seem and how unlike their purpose, both share a common ground—the acceptance of a golem-making stage in which the dream and the child knew the mysteries of Creation. To be able to bear this world, the oblivion of that celestial or magical stage becomes inevitable. Scholem has observed that "in the root of the Midrash lies a remarkable variant of the Platonic conception of cognition as recollection, as anamnesis."<sup>38</sup> There is a moment in Borges' tale when the magician is about to recover the effaced awareness of that early stage, as if suddenly the recollection were to yield to a total illumination in which his origins became unveiled: "From time to time," writes Borges, the magician "was troubled by the feeling that all this had already happened. . . ." The revelation does not occur, but the hint provides one more clue to what Borges discloses only in the last line: the magician's own condition as phantom.

There is, however, one difference that separates the world-view of the Kabbalah from the outlook presented in "The Circular Ruins." In his story, Borges suggests that every man's reality is a dream and the god who is dreaming us is himself a dream. In the Kabbalah, God makes His creatures according to secret formulas that He alone knows; the first golem He created—*Adam Kadmon* (the primeval Adam)—was a creature of cosmic size and strength, and, furthermore, that first man was God Himself. It is in this light that one may understand the Midrash; "While Adam still lay as a golem before Him who spoke and the world came into being, He showed him all the generations and their wise men, all the generations and their judges and their leaders."<sup>39</sup> The Kabbalists managed to demonstrate this identity between God and Adam by means of *gematria* (isopsephism): they found that the numerical

37. *Loc. cit.*

38. *Loc. cit.*

39. Quoted by Scholem in *On the Kabbalah . . .*, p. 162.

value of YHWH is 45 and so is ADAM's. As the Torah is but the name of God, Adam is God Himself. Before Adam, God dwelled in the depths of nothingness, and it is this abyss within God that was overcome in the Creation. Borges takes up where the devotion to monotheistic belief reined-in the imagination of the Kabbalists. The Kabbalah goes as far as identifying Adam—God's golem—with God Himself. Beyond this point we are confronted with an infinite abyss of nothingness which is but the primeval and chaotic state of God before the Creation. Borges, on the other hand, echoing old Gnostic beliefs, implies that behind his dreamer there are perhaps innumerable dreamers: his golem-maker is a mere link in a long golem-making chain. He has said it masterfully in the last lines of a memorable sonnet, "Chess":

**The player too is captive of caprice  
(The words are Omar's) on another ground  
Where black nights alternate with whiter days.**

**God moves the player, he in turn the piece.  
But what god beyond God begins the round  
Of dust and time and sleep and agonies? (SP, 121–23)**

#### **4. The doctrine of the Ibbür**

Borges has written, "In the history of philosophy are doctrines, probably false, that exercise an obscure charm on human imagination, [for example] the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of the soul through many bodies" (*OI*, 37). Flashes of this doctrine flicker throughout his fiction, converting the revelations of theology into nuances of the fantastic. In several stories and essays, the transmigration of the soul is presented as a possible resolution of incoherent situations or conflicting circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

40. Here are a few examples to illustrate Borges' use of the doctrine. To explain the poem "Kubla Khan," dreamed by Coleridge, and the palace Kubla Khan dreamed and then had built, Borges suggests: "The Emperor's soul penetrated Coleridge's, enabling Coleridge to rebuild the destroyed palace in words that would be more lasting than marble and metal" (*OI*, 16). In "The Theologians," one of the sects postulates that "most [men], like Pythagoras, will have to transmigrate through many bodies before attaining their liberation; some, the Proteans, 'in the period of one lifetime are lions, dragons, boars, water and a tree'" (*L*, 123). In "The Shape of the Sword," Borges mentions "enormous epic poems which sang of the robbing of bulls which in another incarnation were heroes and in others fish and mountains. . . ." (*L*, 68).

Borges himself has disclosed the sources of this doctrine in "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," but, as in other instances, here too the motif is a synthesis in which not two but several sources are cohesively blended. In the last paragraph of "The Approach . . .," Borges supplies the Kabbalistic version of the doctrine of transmigration: "With due humility, I suggest a distant and possible forerunner, the Jerusalem Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who in the sixteenth century advanced the notion that the soul of an ancestor or a master may, in order to comfort or instruct him, enter into the soul of someone who has suffered misfortune. *Ibbür* is the name given to this variety of metempsychosis" (A, 51-52). This Kabbalistic version of the transmigration of the soul enriches the doctrine substantially, adding to it original and highly imaginative elements. Thus, according to Luria (the leading figure of the Safed School), each soul retains its individual existence only until the moment when it has worked out its own spiritual restoration. Souls which have fulfilled the commandments are exempted from the law of transmigration and await, each in its blessed place, their integration into Adam's soul, when the general restitution of all things shall take place. As long as the soul has *not* fulfilled this task, it remains subject to the law of transmigration.

This banishment into the prison of strange forms of existence, into wild beasts, into plants and stones, is regarded as a particularly dreadful form of exile. As to how souls can be released from such an exile, Luria refers to the relationship between certain souls, in accordance with their original place in the undivided soul of Adam, the father of mankind. There are, according to Luria, relationships between souls, and even families of souls, which somehow constitute a dynamic whole and react upon one another.<sup>41</sup> These souls have a special aptitude for assisting and supplementing each other's actions. Also, by their piety, they can lift up those members of their group or family who have fallen to a lower plane and can enable them to start on the return journey to higher forms of ex-

41. Cortázar's idea that individual destinies cluster together in *figuras* whose shape and interaction they ignore, just as the stars or a constellation do not know they are part of such a group, may well find in Luria's text a suitable Kabbalistic explanation.

istence.<sup>42</sup> These are the essentials of the Kabbalah's interpretation of the doctrine which is called *gilgul* or *ibbür*, as Borges refers to it.

Kabbalists of the Lurianic School also held the belief that "everybody carries the secret trace of the transmigration of his soul in the lineament of his forehead and his hands, and in the aura which radiates from his body."<sup>43</sup> I fail to find any traces of chiromancy in Borges writings, but the idea that man's soul and its wanderings in search of total fulfillment or, what amounts to the same thing, that man's destiny is drawn in the lines of his forehead, provides a Kabbalistic clue to one of the most beautiful passages written by Borges: "A man," he says in the epilogue to *Dreamtigers*, "sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face" (*DT*, 93).<sup>44</sup> What in the Kabbalah is an ingeniously imaginative thought, in Borges becomes poetry at its best. Yet in the context of the Kabbalah, Borges' text regains the full measure of its implied and perhaps hidden significance. Like God, man creates his own universe, his own labyrinth which, unlike God's, he can penetrate and decipher. Like God, who revealed Himself in the Creation, man reveals himself (his face) in the world he creates (his work). In few writers' work do all the threads of the variegated texture interlock so tightly and firmly as they do in Borges'. This inner unity constitutes another pleasure among the many that Borges' work offers the patient reader.<sup>45</sup>

42. Scholem, *Major Trends . . .*, pp. 282-83.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

44. An early formulation of this thought is found in "Ars Poetica," one of Borges' finest poems. The pertinent stanza reads:

At times in the evenings a face  
Looks at us out of the depths of a mirror;  
Art should be like that mirror  
Which reveals to us our own face. (*SP*, 143)

45. Like many others in Borges' work, this idea cannot be restricted to one exclusive source. In addition to its bearings on Luria's version of metempsychosis, other connections are disclosed by Borges himself. In his essay on Oscar Wilde, he

## 5. Reality of the unreal

Another link between Borges and the world of the Kabbalah is the invention of authors and books which do not exist but could. Borges has explained that "The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then offer a summary, a commentary" (*F*, 15). This effort to abbreviate responds not only to an ideal of verbal economy and density of style, but is also one of the many ways Borges chooses to efface the bounds between what we call the real and the unreal. If life becomes an illusion when presented as a dream somebody is dreaming or as a line of a book somebody is writing, a summary or commentary of a nonexistent book produces the opposite effect: the summary or commentary ends by imposing on us the reality of the imagined book. We can see the device at work in the preface to an anthology devoted to *Almafuerte* and compiled by Borges himself:

Among the works I have not written and shall not write, but which in some way justify me—though in an illusory or ideal way—there is one that could be titled *Theory of Almafuerte*. Drafts of it in an early handwriting prove that this hypothetical book has haunted me since 1932. It has, say, some hundred-odd octavo pages; to imagine it as any more extensive would be exorbitant. Nobody should regret its nonexistence or its existence only in that strange motionless world of possible objects. The summary of it that I am now going to give might prove identical to what one remembers over the years of a long book. Furthermore, its state as an unwritten book aptly fits it; the subject under examination is less the letter than the spirit of its author, less the notation than the connotation of his work. The general theory of *Almafuerte* is preceded by a particular conjecture about Pedro Bonifacio Palacios [*Almafuerte*], but (I hasten to add) the theory can do without the conjecture.<sup>46</sup>

has commented on some perspicuous observations left by the author of *De Profundis*. From this posthumous book Borges quotes Wilde's assertion that "there is no man who is not, at each moment, what he has been and what he will be," to explain later in a footnote: "Compare the curious thesis of Leibnitz, which seemed so scandalous to Arnauld: 'The notion that each individual includes *a priori* all the events that will happen to him'" (*OI*, 80). Borges alludes to the letters Leibnitz wrote to Arnauld (in one of which the famous statement was made), and to the negative reaction of the French Jansenist. Here, in the Leibnitz letter, the relationship is more abstract. Borges' memorable page and the Kabbalistic text share the striking image, in addition to the idea of a destiny conceived *a priori*, of a man's destiny traced in the lines of his face.

46. J. L. Borges, *Prosa y poesía de Almafuerte* (Buenos Aires, 1962), p. 6.

The same pseudepigraphic attitude was adopted by the author of the *Zohar*, although motivated by a different purpose. Moses de León came from the world of philosophic enlightenment against which he subsequently conducted an unremitting fight. In his youth we see him brooding over Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, which he translated into Hebrew in 1264. Somewhat later, de León is turned by his mystical inclinations in the direction of Neo-Platonism, reading extracts from Plotinus' *Enneads*, which in the Middle Ages were commonly known by the title *The Theology of Aristotle*. But at the same time, he was more and more attracted to the mystical side of Judaism and gradually he came to ponder the mystery of the godhead as it was presented by the Kabbalistic theosophy of his age. Moses de León wrote the *Zohar* in order to stem the growth of the radical rationalistic mood which was widespread among his educated contemporaries. "If I told the people," he is quoted as saying, "that I am the author, they would pay no attention nor spend a farthing on the book, for they would say that these are but the workings of my own imagination." To capture the attention of a small and select circle of Jewish readers, Moses de León sets his book against the background of an imagined Palestine, where the famous Mishnah teacher of the second century A.D., Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, is seen wandering about with his son Eleazar, his friends and his disciples, and discoursing with them on all manner of things human and divine. To further mislead the reader, Moses de León used Aramaic, the language spoken in Palestine during the second century A.D. Now, of course, it is known that "The Aramaic of the *Zohar* is a purely artificial affair, a literary language employed by a writer who obviously knew no other Aramaic than that of certain Jewish literary documents, and who fashioned his own style in accordance with definite subjective criteria. The spirit of medieval Hebrew, specifically the Hebrew of the thirteenth century, is transparent behind the Aramaic facade."<sup>47</sup> And yet Moses de León's literary artifice succeeded; until the overwhelming evidence presented by Gershom Scholem, the question of the *Zohar's* authorship bore much re-

47. For a detailed discussion on the subject of the *Zohar's* authorship, see Scholem, *Major Trends . . .*, pp. 156-204.

semblance to the puzzling problem of Shakespeare's or Homer's identity. Was there one author or were there several? Was the *Zohar* the work of many generations, or a compilation from more than one author, rather than the work of one man? Do its several parts correspond to different strata or periods? Many scholars and students of the *Zohar* still hold the belief that the *Zohar* represents only a final edition of writings composed over a long period; others candidly accept Moses de León's own version—that is, the legendary origin of the book according to which Simeon ben Yohai and his son, sentenced to death by the Romans in the Palestine of the second century A.D., fled to a cave and hid there for thirteen years, in which time the *Zohar* took form.

One of the factors that led to the success of Moses de León's pseudepigraphic efforts was his firm consistency in the references and allusions he made to the *Zohar* and its author within the frame of his own works. Borges refers to this equipoise when examining the "enchantments of the *Quixote*": "we are reminded of the Spanish Rabbi Moises de León, who wrote the *Zohar* or *Book of the Splendor* and divulged it as the work of a Palestinian rabbi of the third [sic] century" (*OI*, 46). It is at this point that the author of the *Zohar* comes close to some of Borges' own enchantments. Like Borges, who offers to the reader the summary of a novel which exists only in his imagination, Moses de León supplies fantastic references to nonexistent sources. The whole *Zohar* is full of bogus references to imaginary writings which have caused even serious students to postulate the existence of lost sources.<sup>48</sup> In this respect we cannot help recalling that some of Borges' naive readers have also made diligent attempts to obtain "the first detective novel to be written by a native of Bombay City," Mir Bahadur Ali's *The Approach to al-Mu'tasim*, whose summary Borges offers in his story. But Bahadur Ali's novel as well as Moses de León's cited sources exist only in that Borgesian "motionless and strange world of possible objects."

Like Borges, who delights in intermixing fictional characters with real people, in confounding dummy authors with illustrious ones and hypothetical books with existing ones, the author of the

48. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

*Zohar* has produced an entire library of apocryphal books, and somebody has gone so far as to compile a catalogue of this "library from the upper world"—a tempting idea for a student of Borges. Next to works such as the "Book of Adam," the "Book of Enoch," the "Book of King Solomon," the "Book of Rav Hammuna Sava," and others that Moses de León comments on and profusely quotes—to the perplexity of the reader who knows nothing and can know nothing about them, simply because they exist only in the fancy of the mischievous Kabbalist—we can place Nils Runeberg's *Kristus och Judas* and his major work, *Den hemilge Frälsaren* (with its German translation); Herbert Quain's *The God of the Labyrinth*, *April March*, *The Secret Mirror*, and *Statements*; Volume XI of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*; the nineteen listed items of Pierre Menard's visible works, not to mention his unfinished masterpiece, *Don Quixote*; and several others that Borges quotes and paraphrases throughout his narratives. Yet these libraries of fictitious books, of nonexistent but possible books, acquire in their respective contexts a reality which makes them as real as those catalogued in, say, the Library of Congress—perhaps more real, since readers of Borges and the *Zohar* know much more about those nonexistent books than they will ever get to know about those millions of volumes in a library as bewildering as the Library of Babel. So what has been said of Moses de León's quotations from his "celestial library" can also be said of Borges' imaginary books: "They are entirely of a piece with the context in which they stand, both in style and terminology, and as a rule they are part of the argument as well."<sup>49</sup> In "Three Versions of Judas," the review of Nils Runeberg's books forms the argument as well as the body of the story.

Often the devices used by Moses de León to attain this effect are similar to those employed by Borges. As in the case of *Theory of Almafuerite*, a book which Borges has not written but of which he gives us a comprehensive summary, Moses de León widely quotes from imaginary books he may have written or may have intended to write. Thus, for example, the long passages quoted by him from the *Book of Enoch*, about which Gershom Scholem says: "There

49. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

can be no question of his having used an Arabic *Book of Enoch* unknown to us, or anything else of the sort; nor is it necessary to assume that he had himself written such a book before he quoted it, although he may have intended to do so or even have begun writing it; also Moses de León is the first to quote from the 'Testament of Eliezer ben Hyrkanus' which must have been written by the author of the *Zohar* himself." <sup>50</sup>

## 6. Style

To these contextual resemblances between Borges' work and the Kabbalah, stylistic similarities can be added. Thus, it has been said of the language of the *Zohar*: "It runs all the way from serene beauty to labored tortuousness, from inflated rhetoric to the most paltry simplicity, and from excessive verbosity to laconic and enigmatic brevity." <sup>51</sup> The reader familiar with Borges' development as a prose writer will immediately recognize in this definition some of the most distinctive traits of Borges' style. His early prose is pompous, strained, and exhibits a too obvious effort to astonish. Borges himself has referred to those years of his earlier volumes of essays in the bluntest terms: "I used to write in a very baroque and tricky way. Out of timidity I used to believe that if I wrote in a simple way people would think that I did not know how to write. I felt then the need to prove that I knew many rare words and that I was able to combine them in a very startling fashion." <sup>52</sup> That inflated and often tortuous style has nothing in common with the restrained, precise, and condensed prose of his short stories and later essays. The Borges of the Ultraist experiments has yielded to a Borges whose terse and pregnant style has all the marks of the best prose.

The oxymoron figures among the fondest stylistic devices used by Borges. <sup>53</sup> This preference has very little to do with rhetorical excesses or baroque mannerism whose intention is "to surprise, to

50. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

52. James E. Irby, "Encuentro con Borges," *Vida universitaria*, Monterrey, México (April 12, 1964), p. 14.

53. The reader interested in the use and effects of the oxymoron in Borges' narrative prose may see the subchapter "Oximoron" in *La prosa narrativa de J. L. Borges*, pp. 186-99.

astonish, to dazzle,"<sup>54</sup> nor has Borges' oxymoron any ornamental or embellishing purpose—its use in his prose is definitely expressive and functional. The encounter and reconciliation of two notions which normally contradict or reject each other is, for Borges, a way of expressing at the level of style the paradoxical reality of his fictions. In his stories, frequently, the material of the fable organizes as a huge oxymoron. Style, then, restates and reinforces what is suggested by the theme of the narrative: eternity held in an instant, the chaos of our ordered universe, a dot which contains the universe, a library of illegible books, a pursued pursuer. The author of the *Zohar* also shows a definite predilection for oxymora and paradox, elements that Scholem defines as a "characteristic peculiarity of his style": "'It is and is not' signifies, not that something exists, as it were, only partially, but that its existence is of an exquisitely spiritual nature and cannot therefore be properly described."<sup>55</sup> "Properly described," one could add, by means of the normative alternatives offered by language and whose limitations and barriers the Kabbalists, as well as Borges, strive to overcome.

#### 7. Unveiling the seventy faces of a text

In the *Zohar*, as in Borges' fiction, one also finds the use of an old myth or motif and its subsequent reshaping into a new mode of thought. Moses de León takes the materials from the Aggadah and with them weaves his own fabric. He uses them freely for his own purposes and gives free rein to his imagination in making vital changes, emendations, and reinterpretations of the original. One example of this occurs in *Zohar* II, 124a. There, Moses de León converts a brief Talmudic tale which appears sporadically in the treatise of *Pesahim* 3b into a lively story on the same subject. When the Aggadah already contains mystical elements, these are duly emphasized and occasionally changed into an entirely new myth. A case in point is the mythology of the "great dragon" in the *Zohar* II, 35a, which has evolved from the Aggadah on the *Or ha-Ganuz*

54. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1963), p. 282.

55. Scholem, *Major Trends . . .*, pp. 166–67.

in the Talmudic treatise of *Hagigah* 12a. Borges' treatment does not differ essentially from Moses de León's. In the recreation of the myth of the Minotaur in the story "The House of Asterion," Borges' purpose is not mere virtuosity. Borges himself has suggested that the idea "of a monster wanting to be killed, needing to be killed" <sup>56</sup> is the fictional reverse or paraphrase of another idea stated in his article "A Comment on August 23, 1944," written during the war. There he said that Hitler would be defeated because he wanted to be defeated: "Hitler is collaborating blindly with the inevitable armies that will annihilate him, as the metal vultures and the dragon (which must not have been unaware that they are monsters) collaborated, mysteriously, with Hercules" (*OI*, 136). Yet Borges' own interpretation of his story far from exhausts its far-reaching implications. I believe it is in this story more than in any other that Borges' labyrinthine outlook has been most fully and richly developed.<sup>57</sup> The old and weary myth has become here an effective medium for bringing forth his own worldview. Like the Kabbalist, Borges creates a new myth out of the old one. He has read into the legend of the Minotaur a new meaning which not only redeems the old myth, but also justifies it. Borges, indeed, fulfills here a task similar to Pierre Menard's in undertaking to write a contemporary *Quixote*. In "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," Borges tells us that "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer." This is just an exacerbation of the same attitude, of the same concept of literature according to which "one literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read." "If I were able to read any contemporary page," explains Borges to prove his point, "... as it would be read in the year 2000, I would know what literature would be like in the year 2000" (*OI*, 164). In a strict sense, Borges' own narratives could be defined—applying this criterion—as different ways of reading the systems of philosophy and the doctrines of

56. See Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York, 1969), p. 41.

57. See my essay "Tlön y Asterión: anverso y reverso de una epistemología," *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana*, I, 2 (September 1971), 21-33.

theology. "I am," Borges has said about himself, "a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature."<sup>58</sup> His stories are postures for reading those theories (which have made man what he is), but in the process the claimed "absolute truths" have become myths and marvels, humble intuitions of man's fantasy. Perhaps in this wise and skillful turn of the kaleidoscope lies the revelation of Borges' art. If the essence of this revelation resides in the act of reading the new in an old text, we have simply come to the very point where the Kabbalah begins. These beginnings are described by Borges himself in his essay "The Mirror of the Enigmas":

The notion that the Sacred Scripture possesses (in addition to its literal meaning) a symbolic one is not irrational and is ancient: it is found in Philo of Alexandria, in the cabalists, in Swedenborg. . . . The portentous premise of a book that is impervious to contingency, a book that is a mechanism of infinite purposes, moved them [the Kabbalists] to permute the scriptural words, to sum up the numerical value of the letters, to consider their form, to observe the small letters and the capital letters, to search for acrostics and anagrams. . . . (OI, 125-28)

Now, one should ask what the Kabbalists achieved by means of this mystical hermeneutics. The *Zohar* is undoubtedly the most representative work of many centuries of Kabbalistic exegesis, but it is far from being the only one—there are literally hundreds of such books, many of them still in manuscript form. The *Zohar* shares some basic characteristics with most of those books: thus, for instance, a deliberately unsystematic construction, a tendency—rooted in Jewish thought—to avoid logical systematization. Scholem has illustrated the method (or rather the method's lack of method) of the *Zohar* with a very eloquent comparison: "Most of the fundamental ideas found in the *Zohar*," he says, "were expressed only a little later in a systematically constructed treatise, *Maarekheth Ha-Elohuth* (The Order of God), but how dry and lifeless are these bare skeletons of thought compared with the flesh and blood of the *Zohar*!" And he goes on: "In the *Zohar* the most unpretentious verses of Scripture acquire an entirely unexpected

58. J. L. Borges, "Foreword" to Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York, 1969), p. 9.

meaning. . . . Again and again a hidden and sometimes awful depth opens before our eyes, and we find ourselves confronted with real and profound insight.”<sup>59</sup> The foundation of this imaginative wealth and fertility of thought lies in the belief that “the Torah is an inexhaustible well, which no pitcher can ever empty.”<sup>60</sup>

Borges proposes a similar premise. When he says that “perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors,” he appears to be postulating the opposite case, since he seemingly underlines the exhaustible character of *human* imagination.<sup>61</sup> But it is only the oblique formulation that creates this impression; actually, Borges is saying exactly the opposite. In the essay “The Metaphor,” written in 1952, he offers the reader the prolegomenon of his idea, explaining that

The first monument of Western literature, the *Iliad*, was composed some three thousand years ago; it seems safe to surmise that during this vast lapse of time every familiar and necessary affinity (dream-life, sleep-death, the flow of rivers and time, and so forth) has been noted and recorded by someone. This does not mean, of course, that the number of metaphors has been exhausted; the ways of stating or hinting at these hidden sympathies are, in fact, limitless.<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, “perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that metaphors can be invented. The real ones, those that formulate intimate connections between one image and another, have always existed; those we can still invent are the false ones, which are not worth inventing” (*OI*, 47). Taking this one step further, Borges implies that the task of the writer is not to invent new and original works but rather to reinterpret old ones, or—in John Barth’s words—“to write original works of literature whose implicit theme is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature.”<sup>63</sup>

Borges’ concept of metaphor (which for him is only a metaphor for literature) does not differ essentially from the *Zohar’s* outlook on the Scripture: as the whole world is for the Kabbalists a *corpus*

59. Scholem, *Major Trends* . . . , p. 158.

60. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* . . . , p. 60.

61. For a penetrating article on this question, see John Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *Atlantic* (August 1967), pp. 29–34.

62. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Metaphor,” in “Up from Ultraism,” *New York Review of Books* (August 13, 1970), p. 4.

63. Barth, *ibid.*, p. 31.

*symbolicum* (an idea that Borges has repeatedly quoted),<sup>64</sup> so the Torah is conceived, and to interpret it is, consequently, to unveil its “seventy faces” (i.e., infinite levels). Borges has referred to himself as “the man who weaves these symbols” (*A*, 95), and in a different context he has said that “art operates necessarily with symbols”;<sup>65</sup> in addition, he has insisted on the idea that universal history is “a Sacred Scripture: one that we decipher and write uncertainly, and in which we also are written” (*OI*, 120), and he has likewise endorsed the belief that “we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world; or rather, it is the world” (*OI*, 120). For the Kabbalists, similarly, God looked at the Torah and created the world. The *Zohar*, like the literature of the Kabbalah at large, is an attempt to penetrate the hidden layers of that holy text; the results are those coined symbols and sometimes elaborated allegories by means of which a new, lucid, and original interpretation of the Scripture has been produced. Borges’ narratives and symbols represent a similar attempt, with the difference that the text Borges reads encompasses “the almost infinite world of literature.”

It has been asked whether the true interpretation of certain passages of the Scripture may not be found in the *Zohar* and nowhere else; I would like to ask if Borges’ symbols—which claim not to be a reflection of the world but rather something added to it—do not imply a new understanding of man’s confrontation with the world. Some of these symbols suggest that since man can never find the solution to the gods’ labyrinth, he has constructed his own labyrinth; or, in other words, that since the reality of the gods is impenetrable, man has created his own reality. He lives, thus, in a world which is the product of his own fallible architecture. He knows there is another world, “irreversible and iron-bound,” which constantly besieges him and forces him to feel the enormity of its presence, and between these two worlds, between these two stories—one imagined by God and the other fancied by man—flows the agonizing history of mankind.

64. In a book review in his collection of essays, *Discusión*, p. 164, he says: “. . . for the mystics the concrete world is but a system of symbols.”

65. *Discusión*, p. 141.