

KABBALISTIC TRAITS IN BORGES' NARRATION

by JAIME ALAZRAKI

THE READER WELL ACQUAINTED WITH THE SHORT STORIES OF JORGE Luis Borges knows that his texts do not exhaust themselves at the level of literal meaning. Like most of his narratives in which one easily distinguishes a denotative plot and a connotative symbol or allegory, his prose too offers an immediate and manifest layer and a more oblique and allusive one. Even the casual reader perceives in his stories an obverse-*fabula* and a reverse-symbol, although he may fail to define the bounds of the former with respect to the latter. On the other hand, in the realm of language, even the alert reader tends to accept the text in its externality, dismissing that interior and elusive side, which may be invisible at first glance but which is no less present and functional than its visible counterpart. One of the wonders of Borges' art is precisely that Kabbalistic feature apparent in many of his narrative texts. This art is Kabbalistic in a sense defined by Borges himself in his essay "A Vindication of the Kabbalah," where he explains that his purpose is to vindicate not the doctrine but "the hermeneutic or cryptographic procedures which lead to it." To further elaborate: "These procedures are the vertical reading of the holy text, the reading called *bouestrophedon* (from right to left, one line, from left to right the following one), the methodical substitution of some letters of the alphabet for others, the sum of the numerical value of the letters. . . ." (D. 55). Borges refers here to "certain techniques of mystical speculation which are popularly supposed to represent the heart and core of Kabbalism," yet, according to Gershom Scholem, "none of these techniques¹ of mystical exegesis can be called Kabbalistic in the strict sense of the word. . . . What really deserves to be called Kabbalism has very little to do with the 'Kabbalistic' practices."² However, it is this technical side of Kabbalism that interests us. In essence what is involved are the possible alternatives to the reading

1. A comprehensive reference to those techniques can be found in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 100. For more detailed information, see the article "Gematria" by S. A. Horodezky in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vii, 170-179, and the same entry by Caspar Leviaš in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, v, 559-592.

2. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends*, loc. cit.

of a text. The Kabbalists differentiate between an exoteric interpretation of the Scripture and an esoteric one. In the first case the meaning of the text is literal, but in the second "the Holy Scriptures"—explains a Talmudic mystic—"are like a large house with many, many rooms, and outside each door lies a key—but it is not the right one. To find the right keys that will open the doors—that is the great and arduous task."³ The Kabbalists found that each word of the Torah (Pentateuch) "has six hundred thousand 'faces,' that is, layers of meaning or entrances,"⁴ and that "it is made up not only of the names of God but is as a whole the one great Name of God."⁵ According to an early Midrash, God "looked into the Torah and created the world, since the cosmos and all nature was already prefigured in the Torah, so that God, looking into the Torah, could see it, although to us this aspect of the Torah remains concealed."⁶ For Joseph Gikatila, a leading Spanish Kabbalist of the thirteenth century, "the Torah is not itself the name of God but the explication of the Name of God, and the letters are the mystical body of God, while God is the soul of the letters."⁷ In order to penetrate to recondite strata of the Holy text, the Kabbalists developed four levels of interpretation: *peshat* or literal meaning, *remez* or allegorical meaning, *derasha* or Talmudic and Aggadic interpretation, and *sod* or anagogic meaning. In addition to these levels of interpretation, they used several techniques of speculation such as *Gematria* or calculation of the numerical value of Hebrew words and the search for connections with other words or phrases of equal value, *Notarikon* or interpretation of the letters of a word as abbreviations of whole sentences, *Temurah* or interchange of letters according to certain systematic rules. Applying each of these techniques, the possibilities are almost infinite.⁸

To the question "Have you tried to make your own stories Kabbalistic?" Borges replied, "Yes, sometimes I have."⁹ The question as well as the answer are broad and ambiguous enough to encourage speculation. Borges' availability as a reader of his own work (through the innumerable interviews he has given) has provided rich and valuable information that no student of his work can afford to ignore. In some instances he has furnished possible and

3. Quoted by Gershom Scholem in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), p. 12.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

8. See Caspar Leviaš' article on "Gematria."

9. Ronald Christ, "J. L. Borges: An Interview," *The Paris Review*, xi (Winter-Spring 1967), 161.

alternative clues for the reading of his stories; in others he has suggested new and refreshing interpretations of narratives whose trite understanding was becoming more and more rigid and stereotyped. He has compiled his own anthologies, a conventional undertaking that he has turned into a Kabbalistic reading of his work, not so much because he claims that he would like "to be judged by it (his *Personal Anthology*), and justified or reproved by it (*P.A.*, p. ix)," but rather because the preferences change from edition to edition as if Borges were reminding the reader that an author must be judged by his work and not by his opinions of it. So, an author who usually is the absolute creator of his book, cannot be the absolute reader of it. The degree of lucidity varies from author to author, but whatever the acuteness may be "there are many things in an author's work not intended and only partially understood by him."¹⁰ When Borges was asked about the Kabbalistic quality of his writing, he may have thought of the fact that as the literature of the Kabbalah has been defined as "a narrative philosophy,"¹¹ so his tales have been characterized as "metaphysical fantasies."¹² He may have thought about the idea that the whole world is for the Kabbalists a *corpus symbolicum*, and the definition of himself as "a man who interweaves these symbols (*P.A.*, p. 28)." Or he may have simply referred to the belief that as the Torah has for the Kabbalists "seventy faces" (a number standing for infinite), so the symbols he has coined "are capable of many, perhaps incompatible values." (*O.I.*, p. 663)

We are not suggesting an application of the method of the Kabbalah to Borges' writings. The Kabbalistic exegesis of the Scripture is motivated by the belief that "a work dictated by the Holy Spirit was an absolute text: a text where the collaboration of chance is calculable to zero (*O.I.*, p. 134)." Thus, if the word *light* occurs five times in the story of the first day of Creation, the number is not, cannot, be accidental: it corresponds, as explained in the *Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, to the five books of the Torah. If the Torah begins with the letter Beth, whose numerical value is two, it is because, explains the *Zohar* (*The Book of Splendor*), "the process of creation has taken place in two planes, one above and one below. . . . The lower occurrence corresponds to the higher; one produced the upper world, and the other the nether world (of the visible creation) (*Zohar* I, 240b). It is absurd to think that in

10. J. L. Borges, "Foreword" to Ana María Barrenechea's *Borges the Labyrinth Maker* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. vii.

11. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 87.

12. Adolfo Bioy Casares, "Prologo" to *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (Buenos Aires, 1965), p. 12.

Borges' writings "every word is capable of becoming a symbol" as is the case of the Scripture for the Jewish mystic, but it is not preposterous at all to treat Borges' texts with a rigor similar to the zeal displayed by the Kabbalists in their reading of the Scripture. After all, the efforts of the Kabbalists to find new layers of meaning in the Biblical text are not essentially different from the endeavors of the critic to establish new possibilities or perspectives of interpretation of the literary text. There are two more reasons that reinforce our contention: first, the enthralling fascination that the Kabbalah has exerted on Borges' mind; second, the fantastic character of his stories induces us often to estimate some seemingly incoherent words and occurrences as whimsical displays of arbitrary fantasy, thus missing the true impact of those masterfully constructed whimsicalities. An example of this kind of word is the adjective *unanimous* to modify *night* in the first line of the story "The Circular Ruins;" the word is used for its etymological constituents (*unus animus*)¹³ rather than for its normative meaning in order subtly to anticipate what is literally disclosed in the last line of the story: the magician's condition of appearance dreamt by another. An example of the kind of occurrence that may seem to the reader a playful detour of the imagination just to stress the fantastic character of his tale occurs in the story "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim." The protagonist, a law student in Bombay, finds himself in the center of a civil tumult between Moslems and Hindus; he joins the fray and kills a Hindu. When the police intervene, the student takes flight and makes for the farthest outskirts of town. "He scales the wall of an entangled garden, at the back of which rises a circular tower. . . . Once on the roof, where there is a blackish well in the center, he encounters a squalid man . . . [who] confides in him that his profession is to rob gold teeth from the white-shrouded cadavers which the Parsees leave in this tower (*F.* pp. 38-39)." The encounter of the student with the despoiler of cadavers is an essential link in the sequence of the narrative; the presence, on the other hand, of white shrouded cadavers left in a tower is rather perplexing to the reader unfamiliar with the practices of the Parsees. In the context of

13. I am using a remark made by James E. Irby in his "Introduction" to *Labyrinths; Selected Stories and other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. xxi. Another example of this kind of elusive allusion is the verb *revivir* in the story "The Other Death." The intricate question of the two deaths of Pedro Demian with their puzzling incongruences is already solved in the second sentence of the tale. The two contradictory deaths occur at the same time, but while the first happens in actuality, the second takes place only in Damian's delirium, when in his dying bed he *revivir*ed the battle of 1904. In that imaginary battle he died as a brave man. The word is a definite clue to the whole story, since *revivir* means here that he recalled the battle and that he also lived the battle anew, as is implied in the etymological sense of the word *revivir*, to live again. For further reference on this subject, see my study *La prosa narrativa de J. L. Borges* (Madrid: Ctedos, 1968).

Borges' story, though, the detail is far from being a whim meant to astonish. The tower where the student takes shelter is a *dakhma* or Tower of Silence and in those *dakhmas* Zoroastrians in Persia and India dispose of their dead. The Parsees (Indian Zoroastrians) believe that water, fire, and earth are pure and holy and must be protected and, thus, a corpse—the most impure and contaminating object—may not be buried in the earth or cast into a stream, a pool, or the sea, nor may it be destroyed by fire. Instead they place the corpse in towers built for that purpose where the flesh is consumed by vultures. The *dakhma* is a round tower, some twenty feet high, built of stone in the shape of an open cone, with one door near the base, through which the body is carried in. In the center of the tower there is a pit about six feet deep lined with concentric shelves and paved with stones. Once the flesh has been stripped away by vultures, the bones are cast into the central well where they lie until air, rain, and sun change them into dust, thereby making them pure again. There are seven Towers of Silence in the vicinity of Bombay.¹⁴

In the light of this brief description of a *dakhma*, Borges' enigmatic detail gains a completely unexpected function within the narrative. It is no longer a fantastic oddity as the outward appearance seems to imply, but rather a necessary element that fully integrates with the story as a whole. Borges uses all the materials at his disposal to recreate the setting of his tale; he himself has disclosed certain analogies in the first scene of the story with elements from Kipling's "On the City Wall." Yet, the last thing Borges is willing to do is to produce an effect of local color. He has elaborated on this subject in his essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition": there he wrote:

Gibbon observes that in the Arabian book *par excellence*, in the Koran, there are no camels: I believe if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this absence of camels would be sufficient to prove it is an Arabian work. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were especially Arabian; for him they were a part of reality, he had no reason to emphasize them; on the other hand, the first thing a falsifier, a tourist, an Arab nationalist would do is have a surfeit of camels, caravans of camels, on every page; but Mohammed, as Arab, was unconcerned: he knew he could be an Arab without camels. I think we Argentines can emulate Mohammed, can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color. (L. p. 151)

14. For further reference, see S. Vernon McCasland, Grace E. Cairns, and David C. Yu, *Religions of the World* (New York: Random House, 1969), chapter on "Zoroastrianism," pp. 127-149.

One should remember that Borges' story is written as a summary of the novel *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim* by the Bombay lawyer Mir Bahadur Ali. As such, he rightly assumes that by just describing the facts as they are, his readers will understand that the encounter of the student with the robber takes place in one of seven *dakhmas* found in the vicinity of Bombay, since—paraphrasing Borges—Bahadur Ali, as a native of Bombay, had no reason to know that *dakhmas* were especially Indian; for him they were part of reality, he had no reason to emphasize them. We know, though, that the summary of the hypothetical novel is an artifice of Borges, but precisely because it is so, Borges has given enough and accurate information—and his description is a true model of minute accuracy¹⁵—to enable the perceptive reader to realize that he is referring to a *dakhma*; and, at the same time, he has subtly avoided excessive explanation so as not to destroy the magic of the illusion.

In some instances Borges himself provides the clue to the Kabbalistic construction of his narrative. Towards the end of the same story—"The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim"—, he suggests an allegorical reading of the "detective novel." "Al-Mu'tasim is the emblem of God, and the punctual itinerary of the hero is in some manner the forward progress of the soul in its mystic ascent" (F. p. 41). The search of the student becomes, thus, a mystical experience no different from the one revealed in the Sufistic poem *Mantiq ut-Tair*, which Borges fully describes in a footnote as the solution to the enigmatic ending of the apocryphal novel. Since its author and its protagonist are Muslim, Sufism is the Islamic form of mysticism that best befits the mystical reverse of the story. Yet other possibilities are suggested as probable sources or clues. Borges mentions among those distant and possible predecessors of Bahadur Ali, the Jerusalem Kabbalist Isaac Luria, "who in the sixteenth century proclaimed that the soul of an ancestor or that of a master might enter the soul of an unfortunate to comfort or instruct him" (F. p. 43). But if we accept Borges' *locus classicus* according to which "each writer creates his own precursor," other predecessors could be added to his list. The story may be read as a Sufistic experience, as an expression of Kabbalistic *Ibbur*, and also as a narrative translation of Hindu *Ātman*. As in Ferid ed-Din Attar's poem where the Simurg is God and all men are the Simurg, in *Mundaka Upanishad*

15. Even the apparently insignificant detail of a thief robbing the gold teeth of the cadavers left in the tower is far from being a fortuitous contingency. The Parsees are one of the best educated and prosperous communities of India. The huge Tata industrial empire bears the name of one of India's most famous Parsi families. So, the robber knew exactly what he was doing in the *dakhma*.

"all things proceed from Brahman as sparks from a fire, and all things return to him as rivers to the sea—*Ātman* (the eternal soul) is the means by which one obtains Brahman";¹⁶ thus, Brahman is *Ātman* and *Ātman* is Brahman.¹⁷ It could be argued that once one mystical system is presented, the others are essentially implied in it. In our case Hindu *Ātman*, Sufism (a form of mysticism that has been defined as "Vedanta in Muslim dress"¹⁸) and the *Ibbur* of the Kabbalah are different manifestations of a same attempt: to feel the presence of the Godhead in such a way that God becomes the center and the circumference or, as the *Brihad-aranyaka* Upanishad puts it, "the hub and felly of the wheel of which the individual souls are the spokes."¹⁹

Yet, it is this well-wrought ambiguity in Borges' stories that often generates their density of meaning. The apparent ambiguity is produced by the conjunction of several intuitions, by the overlapping of several motivations and sources that, like thin layers, were masterfully pressed into one tight and limpid fabric. One can simply enjoy the product in its outward result, or one can attempt to strip off those layers in order to comprehend fully the hidden richness embedded in the whole. When the reader recognizes in the wanderings of the Bombay student a form of the mystic ascent of the soul, the detective novel gains in breadth; when, later in the story, Borges discloses that his tale can be read as an echo of the Sufistic poem, one can sense that a new dimension has been added to the narrative. By providing new perspectives for reading the story, Borges has become—without leaving the bounds of the narration—his own critic: he offers to the reader new ways of understanding the story and additional clues for further enjoying it. Yet Borges is far from having singled out all the strands braided in his tale. We have seen that the Hindu notion of *Ātman* may as well be implied in the Bombay student's search, to be more precise, in the moment when the student finally "arrives at a gallery at the rear of which there is a door hung with a cheap and copiously beaded mat curtain, behind which a great radiance emanates. The student claps his hands once twice, and asks for Al-Mu'tasim. A man's voice—the incredible voice of Al-Mu'tasim—urges him to come in. The student draws back the curtain and steps forward. The novel ends" (*F.* p. 41). The previous adventures throughout India become, thus, only steps

leading towards this Atmanic fulfillment. Borges has also anticipated the critic by disclosing "certain analogies" in the first part of the novel with elements from Kipling's story "On the City Walls," but he has said nothing about the "possible" analogies with the motif of the searcher knocking at the door of a house where the mystic union is about to occur. The motif, notwithstanding, as presented by Borges in the passage we have troubled to quote in its entirety, is found in the first part of the Sufi collection of mystical parables, *Masnavi*, of the Persian poet Jalal-ud-din Rumi. Here, a man knocks on the door of his friend. The latter asks, "Who is it?" He answers, "I." The friend sends him away. For a whole year the sorrow of separation burns in him; then he comes again and knocks once more. To the question of his friend, "Who it is?" he replies, "Thou." And at once the room is opened to him in which there is not room for two "I's," that of God and that of man.²⁰ Martin Buber has found a parallel to this motif in a Hasidic tale that obviously shows traces of Sufi influence. In the Jewish version, the element of a man (a fellow friend of Rabbi Aaron of Karlin) knocking at his friend's door is also present. "Who are you?" asked a voice from within, and, certain that his friend would recognize him by his voice, he answered, "I." No reply came, and the door did not open even though he knocked again and again. Finally he cried, "Aaron, why do you not open for me?" Then he heard from within, "Who is it who presumes to say 'I,' as it is fitting for God alone to do!" He said in his heart, "I see then that I have not yet finished learning."²¹

In the context of this old mystic motif, Borges' rather vague and mysterious passage regains the quasi-geometric cohesiveness characteristic of most of his narratives. The detailed explanation supplied by Borges as a footnote at the end of the story only confirms what is subtly alluded to at the conclusion of the student's peregrination. The full description of Ferid ed-Din Attar's poem operates at an outward level: it tells the reader, in a literal manner, that at the moment the student is confronted with the "splendor" coming from the inside, he realizes that he, too—as the birds of the poem with respect to the Simurg—is Al-Mu'tasim. The variation of the motif of Jalal-ud-din Rumi's parable implied in the last ambiguous link of the narration tells the same, but with the Borgesian finesse that converts an apparently insignificant detail into the magic key of the story. The exoteric and esoteric levels of meaning thus coalesce in a text that has the texture of a Kabbalistic cryptogram.

16. R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: University of London, 1957), p. 52, especially the chapter "God and Brahman."

17. Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 97. See chapter "Atman and Soul."

18. R. C. Zaehner, pp. 86-109.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

20. Quoted by Martin Buber in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), p. 222. See chapter "The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion."

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

Although one can find these Kabbalistic traits throughout most of his narratives, it is only natural that they are particularly stressed in stories with some degree of mystic coloring. "The Zahir," "The Aleph," and "The God's Script" are in the same line with "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim." In three of them, Borges intends, as it were, to show that "there is no fact, however insignificant, that does not involve universal history and the infinite concatenation of cause and effect . . . , the visible world is implicit in every phenomenon" (*L.* p. 163). To achieve this, Borges coins three symbols and presents them as depositories of a microcosmic totality that as such is no different from the Godhead that holds in Himself all that is, was, and will be. The three symbols have deep roots in three different religions. At the outset of the first story, the Zahir is presented as "an ordinary coin" whose worth is twenty centavos. By the middle, Borges explains, "Zahir in Arabic means 'notorious,' 'visible;' in this sense it is one of the ninety-nine names of God." The information comes from the *Koran*, where (Surah, LV, 3) it is written that Zahir—the evident, the manifest—"is one of the ninety-nine attributes of God; He is the First and the Last, the Visible and the Occult." The coin is no longer a fortuitous object and becomes a form of mystic illumination. At the end of the tale, the narrator concludes: "In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis recite their own names, or the ninety-nine divine names, until they become meaningless. I long to travel that path. Perhaps I shall conclude by wearing away the Zahir simply through thinking of it again and again. Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God."

What in "The Zahir" is presented only as a possibility, takes place in "The God's Script:" "There occurred the union with the divinity, with the universe (I do not know whether these two words differ in meaning)." A magician, secluded in the darkness of a prison (it goes without saying that for the mystic the body is a dark prison that he strives to transcend), searches for the magical sentence that the god wrote on the first day of Creation "with the power to ward off" the devastation and ruin bound to happen at the end of time. In the prison, he devotes himself to the task of deciphering that secret sentence. Here it should be recalled that for the Kabbalists the Creation is but the result of multiple combinations of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In the *Sefer Yetsirah* (*Book of Creation*), we read: "Twenty-two letter-elements: He outlined them, hewed them out, weighed them, combined them, and exchanged them, and through them created the soul of all creation and everything else that was ever created" (II, 2). The combina-

tion of the letters from which the Creation sprang was put into the Torah (the Pentateuch) but, explains a Midrash on Job 28:13, "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 in 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."²² The tradition of a magical and divine script that Borges recreates in his tale is also a Christian motif: in the Gospel it is said that Christ is the word that will save men from the horrors of the end of all times.

The revelation of the god's script comes finally in a vision of "an exceedingly high Wheel, which was not before my eyes, nor behind me, nor to the sides, but every place at one time (*L.* p. 172)." Here, Borges resorts to a symbol from Hinduism, the *Bhavacakra* (*Wheel of Life*), which represents the different spheres of existence where the infinite concatenation of causes and effects operates. References to the Wheel and its explicit significance are found in two fundamental texts of Hinduism. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* we read, "Thus was the Wheel (*cakram*) set in motion, and that man lives indeed in vain who in a sinful life of pleasures helps not in its revolutions," (III:16). In *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, the notion of the Wheel (of Brahman, of Creation, of Life, as it is often translated) is further developed:

We understand him as a wheel with one fell, with a triple tyre, sixteen ends, fifty spokes, twenty counter-spokes, and six sets of eight. . . (I:4). This is the great wheel (*cakram*) of Brahman, giving life and livelihood to all, subsists in all: in it the swan of the soul is hither and thither tossed. (I:6)

The vision of the Wheel, as seen by Tzinacán, is introduced in Borges' story with the following words, "That Wheel was made of water, but also of fire, and it was (although the edge could be seen) infinite. Interlinked, all things that are, were and shall be, formed it, and I was one of the fibers of that total fabric. . . . There lay the causes and the effects and it sufficed me to see that Wheel in order to understand it all, without end (*L.* p. 172)." This description seems to be an echo or paraphrase of Chapter XI of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a book that Borges familiarly quotes in his essay "Note on Walt Whitman." There he evinces an acquaintance with the *Gita* that goes beyond the casual reading of the book; on the contrary, he rather exhibits a close perusing of it. Even the image of "the in-

22. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 167.

finite fibers of a total fabric" is from Vedantic lineage: "one rope of innumerable strands" says *Svetasvatara* Upanishad, referring to Hindu Wheel.

The *Gita* is the major devotional book of Hinduism. It is an episode of India's great epic, the *Mahābhārata*. Its main story is the war between two branches of the Kaurava family. The *Gita* consists of a long dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, a local prince who volunteered to act as Arjuna's charioteer; but Krishna was not merely a prince—he was God incarnate, the great God Vishnu. Arjuna sees many of his kinsmen and friends in the ranks of the opposing army and refuses to fight, declaring that he would rather die than kill those he loves. To convince him that he must fight, Krishna is not content merely to use arguments already familiar to him, his cast-duty as a warrior, for instance. He sees fit rather to reveal to him the structure of the universe as it really is, and in which Arjuna is just a pawn moved by the hand of an all-powerful God whose will no man or god can resist or thwart. "The ostensible purpose of the *Gita* is to persuade Arjuna to fight; but the bulk of the poem is not concerned with the respective merits of war and peace, but with the deepest things of man and God."²³

Chapter XI constitutes the climax of the *Gita*. In it, Krishna reveals Himself in all His terrifying majesty. Arjuna, not content with the account of Krishna's powers of which he had heard, asks to see him. Krishna grants his request and gives him "a celestial eye" with which he may behold his transfiguration. The rest of the chapter is an account of the tremendous vision: we see the universe in all its variety as Krishna's body, all its multiplicity converging onto One. Arjuna then describes what he sees: the entire world is rushing headlong into Krishna's mouths. It is at this point that Tzinacan's account of his vision in "The God's Script" bears striking similarities to Arjuna's in the *Gita*. In both cases a universal totality is presented within the unlimited limits of a microcosmic image. Borges' text reads:

I saw the universe and I saw the intimate designs of the universe. I saw the origins narrated in the Book of the Common. I saw the mountains that rose out of the water, I saw the first men of wood, the cisterns that turned against the men, the dogs that ravaged their faces. I saw the faceless god concealed behind the other gods. I saw infinite processes that formed one single felicity and, understanding all, I was able also to understand the script of the tiger. (L. pp. 172-173)

23. R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita* (With a commentary based on the original sources), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 6.

In both, Borges' story and the *Gita*, the godhead and the universe are referred to as synonyms. We have seen earlier that Tzinacan fails to distinguish between the divinity and the universe, "I do not know if these words are different," he says. Krishna, before giving Arjuna the "celestial eye," tells him, "See now the whole universe with all things that move and move not, and whatever thy soul may yearn to see. See it all as One in me (XI:7)." As Tzinacan's vision is not the result of mystical meditations and ecstasy but a kind of miraculous apparition, so the union (or *yoga* as it is often called in the *Gita*) with the One is not mystically reached by Arjuna—it is rather granted to him as a token of Krishna's omnipotence.

Arjuna's vision is also described in terms similar to those that introduced Tzinacan's vision. Borges presents the Wheel as "made of water but also of fire." And in verse 28 Arjuna describes his vision, "As roaring torrents of *water* rush forward into the ocean, so do these heroes of our mortal world rush into thy *flaming* mouths (*ibid.*, 28)." For the *Gita* the flames of Arjuna's mouths burning the world up are a representation of Time, which at the end of a world-aeon will devour all the worlds. We know that for Borges, too, Time is a consuming fire and a sweeping river, but—as he adds—"I am the fire . . . , I am the river (*O.I.* p. 197)." Likewise, in verse 32, Krishna reveals Himself as Time, "I am all-powerful Time which destroys all things. . . ." The same imagery, though, conveys different meanings: in the *Gita*, it underlines Krishna's condition of absolute master of all; in Borges' text, it suggests that man is at the same time the master and the victim of his fate.

Yet the closest parallel between the two texts occurs in the description of the theophany itself. Neither the *Gita* nor Borges is willing to substitute the fullness of the vision for an emblem or symbol as the mystic does in a similar situation. Borges names some of the most memorable symbols in the history of mysticism: a blazing light, a sword, a rose, a bird, a sphere, an angel, and adds, "Perhaps the gods would not be against my finding an equivalent image, but then this report would be contaminated with literature, with falsehood" (*A.P.* p. 149). The challenge (for the writer) lies in confronting the reader with the same shocking vision experienced by the seer, in reconstructing with words an infinite diversity that transcends words. The alternative left to the poet is the creation of a literary illusion, of a linguistic reality that becomes a reality in itself. In the description of his vision, Arjuna uses—as Tzinacán—the same anaphoric subject-verb that underscores the overwhelming feeling of perplexity. It is also a way of reinforcing the illusion of a

genuine translation: What I am describing is indeed what I see—there seems to be the understated intention:

I see in thee all the gods, O my God; and the infinity of the beings of thy creation. I see god Brahma on his throne of lotus, and all the seers and serpents of light. . . . I see the splendour of an infinite beauty which illumines the whole universe. It is thee! with thy crown and sceptre and circle. How difficult thou art to see! But I see thee: as fire, as the sun, blinding, incomprehensible. . . . I see thee without beginning, middle, or end. . . . I see thine eyes as the sun and the moon. And I see thy face as a sacred fire that gives light and life to the whole universe. . . .

The Rudras of destruction, the Vasus of fire, the Sadhyas of prayers, the Adityas of the sun; the lesser gods Visve-Devas, the two Asvins charioteers of heaven, the Maruts of winds and storms, the Ushmapas spirits of ancestors; the celestial choirs of Gandharvas, the Yakshas keepers of wealth, the demons of hell and the Siddhas who on earth reached perfection: they all behold thee with awe and wonder.

Gazing upon thy mighty form with its myriad mouths, eyes, arms, thighs, feet, bellies, and sharp, gruesome tusks, the worlds all shudder in affright;—how much more I! (*Gita*, XI)

The technique of chaotic enumeration is also evident in both accounts of the theophany. The most obvious difference between the two, though, is the secular character of Tzinacán's vision as compared to the divine nature of Krishna's transfiguration. In the *Gita*, the universe is described in terms of the tremendous sight of God; conversely, in Borges' text, God is described in terms of the infinite multiplicity of the universe, hence Borges' remark, ". . . the divinity, the universe, I do not know whether these two words differ in meaning."

Borges repeats the experience in "The Aleph." The seer now is Borges himself as the narrator of the story, and the mystic symbol is the Aleph, as before the Zahir and the Wheel. This time, he chose a letter, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and we ask why. Borges' postscript is only half of the answer.^{23b} For the Kabbalah the divine language is the very substance of reality: the Creation is just the result of the infinite combinations of these twenty-two letters. For the Spanish Kabbalist of the 13th century, Abraham Abulafia, "every letter represents a whole world to the mystic who abandons himself to its contemplation."²⁴ It is the contemplation of

23b. There, he says: "As is well known, the Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its use for the strange sphere in my story may not be accidental. For the Kabbalah, that letter stands for the *En-sof*, the pure and boundless godhead; it is also said that it takes the shape of a man pointing to both heaven and earth, in order to show that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher; for Cantor's *Mengenlehre*, it is the symbol of transfinite numbers, of which any part is as great as the whole." [*The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 29]

24. Quoted by G. Scholem in *Major Trends*, p. 134.

a letter—the Aleph—that Borges describes in the last part of his story, a letter which soon becomes a vision of the whole world. A disciple of Abulafia describes a mystical experience in which he saw the letters of God's Name, permuted and combined, taking on the shape of great mountains, the form of a polished mirror shining, as it were, from inside.²⁵ In the *Sefer Yetsirah* (Book of Creation) the letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin* are called mothers. They are not only the three mothers from which the other letters of the alphabet are formed, but they are also symbolical figures for the three primordial elements: the mute *mem* is the symbol of the water in which the mute fish live; the hissing *shin* (or *sin*) corresponds to the hissing fire; the airy *aleph* represents the air. The first emanation from God was the *ruach* (air) that produced fire, which, in its turn, formed the genesis of water (*Sefer Yetsirah*, III). So, the *aleph* constitutes for the Kabbalah the source of all articulate sound; it is regarded as the spiritual root of all other letters.

Borges describes the Aleph as "a small iridescent sphere, of almost intolerable brilliance. . . . Its diameter must have been about two or three centimeters, but Cosmic Space was in it, without diminution of size (*A.P.* p. 150)." Here too the vision is presented in the best tradition of the Kabbalah. An old Midrash of the thirteenth century refers to God as having concentrated His *Shekhinah*, his divine presence, at the place of the Cherubim, as though His whole power were concentrated and contracted in a single point. The sixteenth-century Kabbalist of the Safed School, Isaac Luria, developed this idea in the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum* (concentration or contraction). Luria explains that "sparks of the *Shekhinah* are scattered in all worlds and there is no sphere of existence, including organic and inorganic nature, that is not full of holy sparks which are mixed up with the *kelipoth* (material world) and need to be separated and lifted up."²⁶ The Aleph is revealed in Borges' story in a cellar of a house that is about to be demolished so that a restaurant can be built there. Borges seems to be repeating Moses Cordovero's pantheistic formula: Where you stand, there stand all the worlds.²⁷

The description of the Aleph is a variation of the vision of the Wheel. Now the images are less apocalyptic and more personal be-

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-155.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

27. About the autobiographical character of many of his stories, Borges has said, "I have felt my stories so deeply that I have told them, well, using strange symbols so that people might not find out that they were all more or less autobiographical. The stories were about myself, my personal experiences (R. Christ, p. 155)." In "The Aleph," the passage devoted to the National Prize for Literature, for which Borges-narrator's book *The Cards of the Cards* did not get a single vote is, as everybody knows, an oblique reference to the Municipal Prize for Literature, which was not awarded to Borges in 1941, the year he published *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

cause the narrator is not a magician of the pyramid of Qaholom, but Borges himself. In them, one can see, as through a kaleidoscope, the most essential fragments of the two Borges: the one of Androgúe y Fray Bentos, and the other concerned with mirrors, tigers, and labyrinths.²⁷

These few examples are indicative of the pregnant quality of Borges' art. The Kabbalistic texture of his narrative adds to their manifold complexity and to their richness of meaning. Borges challenges the reader to activate all his resources, to become himself a Kabbalist. He seems to be saying: If man, powerless to solve the labyrinths of the gods, is left with the choice of weaving and deciphering his own, let us—at least—devise them as close as possible to the divine model, let us write a secular text in the manner that the Holy one was fashioned. A second understated motivation comes to our mind: If "universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors" and "true metaphors have always existed," the most a writer can do is to reinterpret them, to find new intonations of those few ones that have always existed. Borges' unhesitant use of old myths, motifs, *topoi*, and even metaphors in the literal sense, is perhaps a form of suggesting that the task of literature lies not in the hunt after the new, in being original (as conventionally understood) but rather in finding new forms of perceiving the old, in being creative with respect to the already created literature. What renders the old, new, the unoriginal, original is, thus, the ability to read the old texts afresh. Like the Kabbalah, which has generated a whole literature out of the Scripture, Borges implies—in praxis—that to write new literature is to read the old one anew. He has said it poignantly, "If I were able to read any contemporary page—this one, for example—as it would be read in the year 2000, I would know what literature would be like in the year 2000 (*O.I.* p. 173)."

MIGUEL ANGEL ASTURIAS: SPOKESMAN OF HIS PEOPLE

by RICHARD J. CALLAN

THE AMERICAN WRITER MOST COMPARABLE TO ASTURIAS IS Hawthorne, the Hawthorne of tales and legends. Although setting, tone, and feeling in their work are vastly different, both writers are concerned with invention and creation rather than reporting, with transmuting reality rather than transcribing it. In both, the Imaginary and the Actual meet, as Hawthorne put it; indeed, fantasy often crowds out the factual altogether. Also, both confess unabashed devotion to ambiguity.¹

With Asturias, myths, legends, and supernatural events are everyday incidents, even in his socially or politically oriented works. Questioned about it, he asserts that such events are part of Guatemalan reality and that were he to leave them out of his fiction, he would be distorting the experience of life in his country, which is what he wishes to portray. He is not being whimsical. It is simply that the majority of the people in his part of Central America, who are Indian or strongly influenced by Indian culture, live with only one foot in reality, which for them is often rendered insufferable by the social order. With the other foot they move into a world of spirits and magic that proves more significant to them because it gives meaning to life.

Asturias expresses this metaphorically in his first novel where a bird, in a pine tree near which a dying beggar lies dreaming that he is happy, sings: "I am the Rose-Apple of the Bird of Paradise. I am life! My body is half falsehood and half truth; I am rose and I am apple, I give everyone a glass eye and a true eye: those who see with my glass eye see because they dream; those who see with my true eye, see because they look. I am life. . . . I am the falsehood of all real things, and the reality of all fictions."² The

1. Other minor similarities: they both turn to their ancestral past for subject matter; they are both the first major writers of their country, and both worked in foreign service.
2. "¡Soy la Manzana-Rosa del Ave del Paraíso, soy la vida, la mitad de mi cuerpo es mentira y la mitad es verdad; soy rosa y soy manzana, doy a todos un ojo de vidrio y un ojo de verdad: los que ven con mi ojo de vidrio ven porque sueñan, los que ven con mi ojo de verdad ven porque miran! ¡Soy la vida. . . soy la mentira de todas las cosas reales, la realidad de todas las ficciones!" *El Señor Presidente* (Buenos Aires, 1959), pp. 26-27.