

Two Borges Essay Manuscripts in the University of Virginia Collection: “La cábala” and “Flaubert”

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How did J. L. Borges write his essays? Some clues can be gleaned from two manuscripts in the Borges Collection in the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia. The manuscripts are interesting in their own right, but they also throw some light on Borges’s working methods. In what follows I examine them from both points of view.

La cábala

As we know, Borges published two essays on the Cabala. The first, “Una vindicación de la cábala,” was included in *Discusión* (1932) with the date 1931 in brackets at the end, and the second, “La cábala,” originally a lecture given in 1970, was published in *Siete noches* (1980).¹ The importance of the Cabala in Borges’s work has been commented on several times, not only by Jaime Alazraki, but also by Saúl Sosnowski, Edna Aizenberg, Marcos Ricardo Barnatán, Mario Satz and Evelyn Fishburn, among others.² What has remained unknown is that Borges

1. See Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Cabala* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 4). Alazraki reminds us that “Una historia de los ángeles” in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) was really Borges’s first venture into this field.
2. Saúl Sosnowski, *Borges y la Cábala* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1976); Edna Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver* (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanística, 1984); Marcos R. Barnatán, “Una vindicación de la cábala” in his *Conocer Borges y su obra* (Barcelona: Dopesa, 1978, pp. 57–76); Mario

Satz, “Borges, el Aleph y la Kábala” in *Borges y la literatura*, ed. Victorino Polo García (Murcia:

Murcia University Press, 1989, pp. 73–83); and Evelyn Fishburn, “Borges, Cabbala and

‘Creative Misreading,’” *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* 14 (4) (1968): 401–18.

began another essay on the Cabala, the first (and perhaps the only) page of which exists in manuscript in the Alderman Library Collection (MSS 10155-m). Written on the same type of squared paper torn from an exercise book that Borges used for the essay on Flaubert also discussed here, it carries in the upper-right-hand margin the notation "Circa 1943" in the handwriting of his mother, Doña Leonor. In appearance the page is strikingly similar, down to the form and frequency of the marginal references and the associated symbols, to those of the Flaubert essay. Either Borges commonly wrote his essays in this way, or the page whose text is reproduced below dates from a period closer to that of the study of Flaubert. The similarity of the paper (albeit of a very common kind in both cases) points to the latter.

The page reads as follows:

[In the upper right margin] La cábala

El valor etimológico de cábala (entiendo que en hebreo la palabra no es esdrújula sino aguda, cabalá) es recibimiento, recepción [Marginal references: E. Br XV 620. Franck I Sérouya 191]; hacia el siglo X o el siglo XI, la palabra significó/indicó el acto de recibir una doctrina transmitida oralmente, y luego esa misma doctrina y las reglas hermeneúticas que se usaban para lograrla [Marginal reference: E. Br. XV 121]. El nombre es significativo de una época y de una mentalidad que hoy difícilmente entendemos [Marginal references: Scholem 21, 22, 354. E. Br. XV, 623]. Nuestro tiempo busca (o simula) la originalidad personal y la novedad; los cabalistas medievales atribuyeron sus singulares especulaciones a Adán, que las recibió de Dios en el Paraíso. Atribución y humildad que se justifican en quienes profesaban, como veremos, la extraña doctrina platónica, y neoplatónica, de qué saber es recordar. (Cap 11, II, 63.) [Marginal references: Deussen 417, 420 sed contra Franck. This is followed by a small round symbol indicating a reference written upside down in the upper-left-hand margin: (Plato) Five Dialogues 109; Bacon's Essays 168].

Detrás de las reglas hermeneúticas de la cábala está la noción (no sospechada por los griegos, para quienes la palabra escrita no era otra cosa que un sucedáneo, un mal sucedáneo de la palabra oral) de un libro sagrado [Marginal reference: Five Dialogues 282]. Spengler llama genéricamente "Alcorán," toda escritura sagrada; al libro de Eziquiel, por ejemplo, que le parece el prototipo del género [Marginal references: Untergang II 298; Glasanap I 386]. Ello es justo, ya que el islam es una forma árabe del judaísmo y ya que ningún libro ha sido exaltado como el Alcorán. Los musulmanes dicen que el texto original—la Madre del Libro—está en el cielo y es un atributo eterno de Dios, como su Misericordia o su Justicia, y no una criatura [Marginal references: E. Br. XV 106; Rodwell 130; el Aleph 88; Golo (pr. d.) 53]. Es así anterior al idioma árabe y a los seres que nombra. Chihiz de Basra dijo que el Alcorán es una sustancia que puede tomar la forma de un hombre o la de un animal, y otros le atribuyen dos caras. Se trata verosíblemente, de una manera metafórica de indicar dos interpretaciones posibles, según la letra o según el espíritu. Dante en la epístola a Can Grande della Scala, declara que hay en su Comedia, como en la Sagrada Escritura, un sentido cuádruple, como en las escrituras. [Marginal reference: Opere 437];³ Juan Escoto Erigena postula un número infinito, como los tornasoles del plumaje del pavo real [Marginal reference: Brehier 49]. Isaac Luria enseñó que había 600.000 interpretaciones, 600.000 caras de la Ley, tantas como había almas en Israel

3. In the manuscript the sentence ends "como en las escrituras." This phrase has been provisionally replaced by the earlier "como en la Sagrada Escritura" but here as elsewhere Borges left in both versions, presumably so that he could decide later which finally to adopt.

4. After Deussen there is a symbol in the second row upside down in the upper-left margin of Deussen's *Christians*.

en el tiempo de la Revelación [Marginal reference: Scholem 210]. Esto quiere decir que cada cual puede interpretar la ley a su modo. Seiscientos mil es una manera aproximativa, o figurada, de decir infinitas interpretaciones; pensemos lo que comporta la noción de un libro sagrado, de un libro redactado, textualmente, por una inteligencia infinita.

Si la tierra es un espejo caído y turbio de los prototipos platónicos, si la blancura y la justicia y la mesa están en el cielo [Marginal reference: Republic 297, 295], entonces como dijo David, soy un forastero en la tierra [Marginal reference: Salmos 119:19], y la creación no es otra todo el universo no es otra cosa que el exilio de Dios. Dios, al principio, se retira, se exila, y ese retiro es la creación de los mundos [Marginal reference: Scholem, 261, 20]; desandar ese largo labirinto de la divinidad, invertir el proceso mediante el cual emanamos de la raíz, des-soñar (undream) el sueño de nuestro padre—tal es el propósito la voluntad de la cábala [Marginal references: Scholem 280, 414, 281, 254]. “Ninguna cosa está en su lugar” se lee en el Safer Hagigulum o Libro de las transmigraciones, que redactó un discípulo de Isaac Luria. [Marginal references: Scholem 286, 249]; el exilio es un símbolo terrenal del proceso cósmico temporal de un proceso eterno [In left margin: del proceso X]. Se ha discutido si la cábala debe poco o mucho a Platón y a la escuela de Alejandría; Franck niega o atenúa esa deuda [Marginal references: Franck 269, 230]; Paul Deussen⁴ y Guido D. Ruggiero lo afirman; Martin Buber prefiere hablar habla de un río secular que recibe muchos afluentes que no desvían su curso [Marginal reference: Vom Geist des Judentum 96].

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4. After Deussen's name there is a small oblong symbol indicating a second reference written upside down in the upper-left-hand margin: Deussen 417, cristianesimo III 67.

Here the page ends. Despite the signature, it is hard to believe that this is the complete essay. The impression I have is that Borges was dissatisfied with his earlier “Una vindicación de la cábala” and intended to begin again. That would not be surprising. The 1931 essay, after its opening paragraph, contains only a couple of sentences that are directly connected with the title. One, in the middle of the essay, tells us that the cabalistic writers accepted the Old Testament as a work entirely dictated by the Holy Spirit, which the authors of the books contained in it simply took down mechanically. The other sentence, at the essay's end, justifies the elucubrations of the Cabalists precisely on that ground: that a work of the Holy Spirit must of necessity be meaningful in every minute particular, and thus every approach to it based on such an assumption is valid. Apart from these two affirmations, the bulk of the 1931 essay is made up of two digressions. The first makes gentle fun of the Christian concept of the Trinity. The second develops the idea that all literary works contain elements that are present by mere chance, whereas a work dictated by an omniscient Holy Spirit would be a unique exception and thus could be treated in the cabalistic manner. The essay is hardly an adequate treatment of the topic.

For the time being Borges held his hand. However, in “Tres versiones de Judas” (*Ficciones*, 1944) we notice an indirect allusion to cabalistic ways of thinking in the third paragraph: “Suponer un error en la Escritura es intolerable; no menos intolerable es admitir un hecho casual en el más

5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas 1923-1972* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974, hereafter O.C., p. 515).

precioso acontecimiento de la historia del mundo.”⁵ Although here we are in the realm of New Testament interpretation, the source for part of the inspiration for the story is obvious. Similarly in “El espejo de los enigmas” (*Otras inquisiciones*, 1952) we read:

Bloy (lo repito) no hizo otra cosa que aplicar a la Creación entera el método que los cabalistas judíos aplicaron a la Escritura. Estos pensaron que una obra dictada por el Espíritu Santo era un texto absoluto: vale decir un texto donde la colaboración de azar es calculable en cero. Esa premisa portentosa de un libro impenetrable a la contingencia, de un libro que es un mecanismo de propósitos infinitos, les movió a permutar las palabras escriturales, a sumar el valor numérico de las letras, a tener en cuenta su forma, a observar las minúsculas y las mayúsculas, a buscar acrósticos u anagramas y a otros rigores exegeticos de los que no es difícil burlarse (O.C. 722).

Clearly the Cabala had continued to intrigue Borges. Meanwhile, as we have seen, he evidently reread his earlier essay and decided that the topic deserved more systematic treatment. The present draft sticks much more consistently to the point than does his “Una vindicación de la cábala.” Only a couple of points survive from the 1931 essay. There Borges had written:

Los islamistas pueden vanagloriarse de exceder esa hipóbole [i.e. that the Old Testament was dictated by the Holy Spirit], pues han resuelto que el original del Corán-la madre del Libro—es uno de los atributos de Dios, como Su misericordia o Su ira, y lo juzgan anterior al idioma, a la Creación.

Now he writes:

Los musulmanes dicen que el texto original—La Madre del Libro—está en el cielo y es un atributo eterno de Dios, como su Misericordia o su Justicia, y no una creatura. Es así anterior al idioma árabe y a los seres que nombra.

Similarly in 1931 he had declared in a footnote:

Orígenes atribuyó tres sentidos a las palabras de la Escritura: el histórico, el moral y el místico, correspondientes al cuerpo, al alma y al espíritu que integran el hombre; Juan Escoto Erigena, un infinito número de sentidos, como los tornasoles del plumaje del pavo real.

Here (in the Alderman manuscript) he writes:

Dante, en la epístola a Can Grande della Scala, declara que hay en su Comedia un sentido cuádruple, como en las Escrituras; Juan Escoto Erigena postula un número infinito, como los tornasoles del plumaje del pavo real.

These similarities indicate that Borges had the earlier essay in front of him when he tried to rewrite it, and they justify the conjecture that he was attempting to improve on it. In fact, in the Alderman Library manuscript,

there are no digressions. It begins with an explanation of the meaning of the word "cábala" and goes on to relate the ideas of the cabalistic writers to those of the Platonists and Neo-Platonists. Next it develops the basic tenet of Cabala studies: that the Old Testament scriptures are exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit. Finally it returns to the aim of the Cabalists—to work back to the root of the text, to the Holy Spirit itself, breaking out of human beings' exile from the ultimate—and compares it tentatively with the Platonic belief in eternal archetypes.

At this point the fragment ends. We may suspect that Borges perhaps gave up (if this was the end) because of the difficulty of developing the topic without straying away from a central line of argument that is necessarily somewhat abstruse. When he returned to the subject in 1970, he began with the notion of a totally sacred book and with Spengler—that is to say, with elements taken from the first two paragraphs of the fragment we have reproduced. A little later we find a familiar passage:

Para los ulemas, para los doctores de la ley musulmana, el Corán no es un libro como los demás. Es un libro (esto es increíble pero es así) anterior a la lengua árabe; no se lo puede estudiar ni histórica ni filológicamente pues es anterior a los árabes, anterior a la lengua en que está y anterior al universo. Ni siquiera se admite que el Corán sea obra de Dios; es algo más íntimo y misterioso. Para los musulmanes ortodoxos el Corán es un atributo de Dios. Como Su ira, Su misericordia o Su justicia. En el mismo Corán se habla de un libro misterioso, la madre del libro, que es el arquetipo celestial del Corán, que está en el cielo y que veneran los ángeles.⁶

6. Jorge Luis Borges, *Siete noches* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica 1980, p. 128).

Further on (p. 131), Borges returns to the idea of the "texto absoluto" in which "nada puede ser obra del azar" and to the affirmation of Duns Scotus. Clearly, both "Una vindicación de la cábala" and the fragment reproduced here were present in his mind. The new element is that the cabalistic writers were influenced by the Gnostics rather than by Platonic thought. Now, on the third try, Borges finds a way to explain satisfactorily what the Cabalists were up to. The core of the *Siete noches* essay is the revealing contrast that Borges establishes between treating a classic work, such as the *Quijote*, in the cabalistic manner, and treating the Old Testament in this way. Second, we are introduced to the paradoxical idea of the printed sign, the letters of the Jewish alphabet, as anterior to the sounds of the speech that they represent.

With this, Borges reverts to the notion, central to all three essays, of the Old Testament as a sacred and, hence, infinitely interpretable book. But further reading has provided him with a new element: the idea (borrowed by the Cabalists from the Gnostics) that the scriptures were not dictated directly by the Holy Spirit but were, instead, intimated to those who wrote them by inferior emanations of the divine. At this point, Borges once more appears unable to carry the central theme of the cabalistic way of interpreting the Scriptures any further. He thus veers off into a discussion of the similarity between a text dictated by an inferior emanation of the

deity and a world dominated by evil. Finally the essay is brought to a close by means of a lengthy reference to the familiar topic of the Golem.

The foregoing comparison of Borges's three attempts to handle the Cabala shows that, in the second and third cases, more reading had enriched his original approach by suggesting a parallel first with Platonic thought and second with Gnostic ideas. But it also shows that he was wrestling with a topic that was really too arcane to lend itself readily to treatment in a short essay. Hence the fragment remains just that (unless further pages have been lost), and the *Siete noches* essay returns in the end to the digressive model of the one in *Discusión*. At the beginning of "Pascal" in *Otras inquisiciones* Borges asserts: "Ciertamente, no hay nada en el universo que no sirva de estímulo al pensamiento" (O.C. 703). In effect, in many of his essays he deploys unusual topics as pegs on which to hang brief disquisitions of interest primarily to himself. We see it in the Flaubert essay. We also see it here.

Flaubert

Borges's "Vindicación de Buvard et Pécuchet" and "Flaubert y su destino ejemplar," having appeared in *La Nación* on November 14 and December 12, 1954, respectively, were added to *Discusión* in 1957. What has not been well known until now is that these are rewrites of parts of a much more extensive essay on Flaubert, the manuscript of which is now in the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia (MSS 10155-i). Written out entirely in Borges's tiny handwriting, the manuscript is undated, but references in the text to the reader in the 1950s and, for example, to no. 185 of the magazine *Sur* (1950) suggest that it belongs to the early 1950s. On the same kind of squared paper torn from an exercise book as "La cábala," it is written on only one side of the page. It breaks off suddenly on the top of p. 16 and seems not to have been completed. Indeed Borges used the space remaining on the last page and on the blank side of other pages for the draft of "Milonga de Jacinto Chiclana," which eventually appeared in *Para las seis cuerdas* (1965). In the left-hand margin of each page, and sometimes in the upper margin, are references to the authorities that Borges used or quoted from. They reveal the extent of his reading in connection with the essay. No comparable example of his working methods, to my knowledge, exists.

Two things are immediately apparent. The first is that, at more than 11,000 words, it is among the longest of Borges's essays that we possess. The second is that it is incomplete. Not only does it lack a conclusion but, more surprisingly, it does not deal with Flaubert's most famous work, *Madame Bovary*. It is a rambling, discursive piece, full of digressions and curious scraps of information, quite unlike anything else we have of Borges's. It reads like the first draft of a general study on Flaubert into which Borges may have intended to insert material on *Madame Bovary*

later. The two abovementioned published sections were taken from it in both cases but only in slightly modified form. It seems probable that, along with the Alderman Library's "La cábala," it provides us with a model of how Borges the essayist sometimes operated. At the end of his "Historia de la eternidad" in the book of the same title, he lists ten books he regards as sources deserving of special mention, writing: "He trabajado al azar de mi biblioteca" (O.C. 367). We can easily imagine him writing references in the margin of the manuscript, just as he does in the Alderman Library manuscripts mentioned here, but in the case of "Flaubert" we are staggered by the breadth and heterogeneity of the list. In addition to his mention of thinkers from Aristotle, Plato, and Pliny, through Spinoza and Newton to Herbert Spencer and Spengler, and of writers from Pindar, Rabelais, Voltaire, and Boileau through Tasso, Milton, Swift, Johnson, and Goethe to Chesterton and Joyce, Borges consulted the works of more than 70 critics and scholars writing in English, French, German, and Italian (Spanish being barely represented). There are no fewer than 16 references to Borges's beloved eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, after which, logically, come French commentators on Flaubert such as Dumesnil, Thibaudet, Digeon, and Faguet. Borges makes predictable references to some of his favorite writers: Hume, Schopenhauer, Shakespeare, Dante, Quevedo, Cervantes, Browne, Blake, De Quincey, Swinburne, Morris, James, Kipling, Stevenson, Wells, Chesterton, Shaw, Valéry, and Mallarmé. More remarkable are his mentions of Middleton Murray, Alfred Noyes, Proust, Polibius, Hugo, Newman, Mathew Arnold, Dowson, Gibbon, and Barbey D'Aureville, among others—some of whom one is less likely to associate with Borges. Although a few of these references may have been cribbed from other books, the fact remains that to see Borges at work, as in this manuscript, is to be reminded again of his prodigious erudition and astounding memory. The fascinating thing is to perceive how the two published essays on Flaubert rest on this (hitherto invisible) foundation of scholarly reading.

Much of the intrinsic interest of the essay lies in the fact that Borges should have written it at all; that he devoted one of his longest essays not to a figure like Stevenson, Wells, or Chesterton—who, in different ways, shared his impulse to break with old-style reductive realism—but to Flaubert, whom we think of as perhaps the greatest of the realists. It is clear that Borges regarded Flaubert as a wonderfully gifted writer, but as one who was trapped inside the conventions of nineteenth-century realism that Borges rejected. Perhaps this is why the essay, paradoxically, does not deal with *Madame Bovary* but tends instead to emphasize other aspects of Flaubert's fiction that are less obviously realistic, at least in theme and setting. Borges categorizes even *L'Education sentimentale* as a historical novel rather than as a *roman d'analyse*, and he presents its theme as that most dear to himself: Time.

The only example of Flaubert's realism that Borges comments on as such is that of *Un Coeur simple*. Borges, interestingly, lays down his weapons and praises the story unstintingly as "truthful" and hence as one that is enjoyed primarily because of the ease with which, due to Flaubert's superb reflection of reality, the reader can identify with the character of Felicité. This is an all but unique example of acceptance by Borges that "realistic" procedures and reader identification can play important roles in fiction. We perceive, however, with the comment: "Todo, así queda irreal," that he is on much more congenial ground with *La Légende de Saint Julien L'Hospitalier*. Here he is able to reiterate, with the support of Dr. Johnson and Coleridge, his own basic conviction that aesthetic pleasure really has nothing to do with the perception of verisimilitude. One of the key passages of the manuscript is the one in which Borges contrasts the aesthetic appeal of *La légende*, which we enjoy as if it were a "sueño homogéneo," with the "meras verosimilitudes" and the "invenciones circunstanciales" of "Herodias" and *Salammbô*. No one can understand Borges's most characteristic stance with regard to creative writing without considering this distinction, which places self-consistent fantasy above straight mimesis. To be sure, Borges, in different parts of his non-fictional work, bolstered his preference with arguments about the nature of language and about our inability ever to know the "reality" that we should like it to express. But in the end we are left with a simple preference, which Borges's approach to Flaubert convincingly illustrates.

A feature of the Alderman Library essay is its appearance of intellectual self-indulgence, in contrast to the meticulousness with which Borges records the references and pauses to correct extremely trivial points of style. Certain elements of the text can be seen to trigger a reaction of heightened interest in Borges, who then simply allows himself to follow up the associations. Thus, the idea of the writer who is consecrated to his mission takes Borges from Pindar through Tasso to Milton in a page that could easily have been reduced to a sentence. Similarly Borges drags in the "Book of Nature" idea to allow references to Bacon and Sir Thomas Browne. A long disquisition on the destruction of Carthage wanders far from relevance to *Salammbô* to incorporate reflections on Punic religion and Roman history. Most of all, the need to deal with *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* permits Borges to comment on early Christian monasticism, to mention St. Gregory's remarks on popular interest in theological discussion, and to muse on mythical monsters. Though his treatment of Buvard and Pécuchet is less digressive, it still includes a repetitious reference to Herbert Spencer's views on human ignorance of ultimate truths. It seems unlikely, in view of the bibliographical apparatus, that these passages were the result of willful inattention to the essay's general line of argument. Rather, we tend to suspect that some of Borges's other published essays, many of which are on slightly curious themes, may have grown (like the two on Flaubert) out of drafts containing the same sort of

loose, associative, intellectual discursiveness found in the Alderman Library manuscript and illustrated here.

Broadly speaking, we see in the Flaubert manuscript an example, on a magnified scale, of Borges's characteristically subjective approach to literary criticism. It tends to tell more about Borges himself than about the work he discusses. In the manuscript, for example, we notice his direct intervention as he sets himself up alongside Frédéric Moreau in *L'Education sentimentale* to criticize in Frédéric the absence of "la desinteresada pasión de la inteligencia." That Borges cannot forgive Flaubert for deliberately excluding this trait from Frédéric's character, that he wants Frédéric to be both more of a conscious intellectual and less of an egoist, tells us much about Borges's personal values but little about the novel in question. Also striking is Borges's comment *à propos* of *La légende de Saint Julien L'Hospitalier* that he wishes to "indagar (en lo posible) cómo pudo referirla Flaubert." This interest in technique is exactly what we should expect from a writer as absorbed with conscious narrative strategies as Borges was. But it is certainly not what the reader gets from Borges's criticism, in this manuscript or elsewhere. The structure of the essay indicates quite clearly that the last thing Borges proposes to discuss is the "how" of Flaubert's writing. On the contrary, if this manuscript illustrates anything, it is the way Borges uses aspects of Flaubert's literary personality and work virtually as pretexts to pursue some of his own intellectual interests and to expound some of his own opinions. Thus, this hitherto unknown piece merits attention not as a contribution to Flaubert criticism, but rather as an extended example of Borges's mind at work on a rather unexpected subject.