

# POETS OF INFINITY: BORGES AND THE POETICS OF KABBALAH

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## PREFACE

### Borges, Kabbalistic Theosophy

Towards dawn, he dreamt he had hidden himself in one of the naves of the Clementine Library. A librarian wearing dark glasses asked him: *What are you looking for?* Hladík answered: *God.* The librarian told him: *God is in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the 400,000 volumes of the Clementine. My fathers and the fathers of my fathers have sought after that letter. I've gone blind looking for it.* He removed his glasses, and Hladík saw that his eyes were dead. A reader came in to return an atlas. *This atlas is useless,* he said, and handed it to Hladík, who opened it at random. As if through a haze, he saw a map of India. With a sudden rush of assurance, he touched one of the tiniest letters. An ubiquitous voice said: *The time for your work has been granted.* Hladík awoke.<sup>1</sup>

This dream, dreamt by one of his Jewish protagonists, clearly demonstrates the poetico-mystical characteristics of Borges' kabbalistic writing. The universe being precisely but enigmatically ordered, books and letters conceal divine light and mystery and the human desire to decipher them.<sup>2</sup> Borges also subtly inserts

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Louis Borges, *Ficciones* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 118.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Scholem's account of an ancient Jewish mystic's parable: "In his commentary on the Psalms, Origen quotes a 'Hebrew' scholar, presumably a member of the Rabbinic Academy in Caesarea, as saying that the Holy Scriptures are like a large house with many, many rooms, and that 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" (*On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim [New York: Schocken, 1969], 12).

autobiographical details, having been an avid reader of atlases in his youth in the National Library and becoming a chief librarian after going blind in his old age. Reality and fantasy hereby merge: in a certain sense, in this passage Borges is both the blind librarian and the atlas reader—and also the dreamer who, like the kabbalists, seeks God in (the) words and letters. This style prompted George Steiner to call Borges the “third modern kabbalist”—following Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem.<sup>3</sup> Steiner’s view appears more justified than the claim that Borges turns the kabbalists into medieval Borgean figures who, like him, wander through the divine labyrinths, singing the song of infinity as they seek a way out. The present volume sets out to trace the fine outlines of Borges’ Kabbalistic gropings after the divine, in light of the worldview of the Kabbalists as he depicts them in his own image, in the wake of his long years of immersion in their writings.<sup>4</sup>

In the prologue to *Ficciones*, Borges makes the following beguiling statement:

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 to offer a résumé, a commentary.<sup>5</sup>

Disregarding this advice, I offer below a concise survey of the major conclusions drawn in the present volume—a review that may save some readers the trouble of reading through its (own) 250-odd pages and thus proving its worth.

Borges’ general tendency is to philosophize kabbalistic ideas, metaphors, and symbols. That it is not to say that he seeks to translate it into tight, coherent theoretical system, being innately suspicious of philosophical “systems” since, in his view, we have no idea what the universe is.<sup>6</sup> (Borges rather holds that the history of philosophy is simply the documentation of human wanderings in search of the traditional truth of the universe.) Hereby, he prefers the Socratic view that philosophy

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<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 70.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise survey of the literature on Borges’ kabbalistic thought, see Elliot Wolfson, “In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah,” *JQR* 104.3 (2014): 362-65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ficciones*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. “... it is clear that there is no classification of the Universe that is not arbitrary and full of conjectures. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what kind of thing the universe is. ... The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe does not, however, dissuade us from planning human schemes, even though we know they must be provisional” (Jorge Luis Borges, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” in *Otras Inquisiciones*, trans. Will Fitzgerald: <https://www.entish.org/essays/Wilkins.html>; see also *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993], 3).

is merely philosophizing: the common incessant pursuit (*suzethesis*) of perfect knowledge. Borges' philosophization of the Kabbalah is thus a way of perceiving the latter as part of the human endeavor to decode the order of the universe in cosmological and cosmogonical terms.

Rather than dismantling the kabbalists' profound mysticism, this Socratic philosophical stance seeks to interpret it, à la William James, as the flickering of the perfect "noetic knowledge" that places the mystic's awareness in a clear, bright light.<sup>7</sup> For his part, Borges highlights the imperfection of this knowledge and the perpetual human longing to attain it—a yearning fulfilled by neither philosopher nor mystic. Borges' philosophization of the Kabbalah is well illustrated in his early reference—his first written evidence—to kabbalists as "fanatics of reason" (*fanáticos de la razón*).<sup>8</sup> It also resonates with a categorical statement he made in a later public lecture on the Kabbalah, addressing the kabbalistic doctrine: "I am not dealing here with a museum piece from the history of philosophy", he admits, and then adds "I believe the [kabbalistic] system has an application: it can serve as a means of thinking, of trying to understand the universe." He thus regards later on Kabbalah as a "sort of metaphor of thought."<sup>9</sup>

Borges' philosophization of the Kabbalah also takes form in the cosmopolitan and syncretic guise in which he garbs the kabbalists in his writings, overriding any national identity and portraying them as alchemists, Gnostics, mystics of knowledge and metaphysical philologists. He also regularly depicts kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah (if I may use a pivotal kabbalistic metaphor) as a 'vessel' containing the 'lights' of weighty philosophical questions: the logic of identity, infinity in time and space, the enigmatic nature of art, human knowledge and its boundaries, the essence of reality, the cosmic order governing the world, the mystery of the hidden godhead. Over all these hovers the fine but clear notion of Kabbalah as a mystical expression of idealistic philosophy, which repudiates the existence of material reality.

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<sup>7</sup> "Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time" (William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* [London/New York: Routledge, 2002], 267).

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Louis Borges, *El Tamaño De Mi Esperanza* (Barcelona: Biblioteca Breve, 1926), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Jorge Louis Borges, "The Kabbalah," in *Seven Nights*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 2009), 101.

We can thus make a general observation with regard to Borges' long-term interest in kabbalistic writings. He appears to be indifferent to prophetic-ecstatic Kabbalah, which strives for mystical unity between the kabbalist's mind and divine intellect, questioning the human cognitive ability to understand divine workings.<sup>10</sup> In other words, he pays little attention to the mystic's personal salvation, being explicitly unconcerned with the eternity of his soul (since, being "so exhausting being Borges," he wishes for complete oblivion after death).<sup>11</sup> He also disregards theurgical Kabbalah, which seeks to recognize the divine powers and influence them by means of mystical intention, since in his view mortals are probable incapable of perceiving God's hidden, exalted status. His focus rather lies on the unconceptualized ideal of perfect mystical knowledge that enables a human individual to decipher the universe and understand its workings. He thus regards theosophical kabbalistic knowledge primarily as the human endeavor to attain a mystical grasp of the "work of creation"—the cosmology and cosmogony of the enigmatic universe—rather than the "work of the chariot" that opens a window onto the upper realms. That being the case, he favors the mystical trance-state that comprehends the universe in one go, in an omniscient synoptic glance—and, in line with this, he is fascinated with the idea of objects or words serving as a perfect microcosm of the cosmos as a whole.

In other words, Borges privileges perfect mystical knowledge (omniscience) over the pursuit of unlimited magical power (omnipotence). This intellectual orientation does not blunt his finely attuned aesthetic sensitivity to the evaluation of kabbalistic ideas, metaphors, and symbols, however. As per his wont, he permeates philosophic wonderment with a profound aesthetic marveling and ironic entertainment, over which hovers a deep sense of what Otto calls the *mysterium tremendum*, experienced by the person who wanders through the dizzying labyrinths of the universe.<sup>12</sup>

This blending of aesthetics, philosophy, mysticism, ironic doubt, religious sensitivity, and literary fabrication creates the distinctive 'kabbalistic' texture of the Borgesian text in context. Hereby, he reorganizes kabbalistic myths in a bold form of syncretism: merging fundamental Jewish values, highlighting the idealistic aspects of theological concepts, and above all, forging new, fantastical symbols out of traditional

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<sup>10</sup> For these two streams, see, for example, Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2005), 85 ff.

<sup>11</sup> "yo no quiero seguir siendo Jorge Louis Borges, yo quiero ser otra persona. Espero que mi muerte sea total, espero morir en cuerpo y alma" (*Obras Completas*, 4:175).

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), Chap. 4.

kabbalistic ones. If Scholem's argument that, like all mystics, the kabbalist seeks to "confirm religious authority by reinterpreting it, regardless of whether he looks upon the traditional conceptions as symbols or attempts to elucidate them with the help of new symbols" holds true, we may say that Borges applies the process of symbolization to kabbalistic symbols, producing second-order symbols in his fictional writings.<sup>13</sup> In the words of one of the classics of Jewish mysticism, in this way he "hews vast columns out of the intangible air."<sup>14</sup>

This trend, in both its aesthetic and philosophic dimensions, also determines the fine line between the kabbalistic mystical perception of the godhead and Borges' subtle religiosity (if I may be permitted to use what many consider an oxymoron). As Scholem puts it, the kabbalists' belief that the *Ein Sof* is totally invisible and inscrutable can be defined as "mystical agnosticism."<sup>15</sup> In similar dialectic fashion, Borges' religiosity is not simply a flat form of theism, agnosticism, or atheism but what I call "intuitive agnosticism"—a blend of the human recognition of divine invisibility and abtuseness with a profound sense of mysterious elusive immanence. Borges illustrates this fusion in one of his poems in the phrase *horror sagrado* ("holy dread").<sup>16</sup> It is also summed up in an unforgettable passage in "The Library of Babel":

I cannot think it unlikely that there is such a total book on some shelf in the universe. I pray to the unknown gods that some man—even a single man, tens of centuries ago—has perused and read that book. If the honor and wisdom and joy of such a reading are not to be my own, then let them be for others. Let heaven exist, though my own place be in hell. Let me be tortured and battered and annihilated, but let there be one instant, one creature, wherein thy enormous Library may find its justification.<sup>17</sup>

The kabbalistic themes lying at the heart of the chapters of this volume form a central part of Borges' oeuvre: the holy names and the supreme name of God (chapter 1), the absolute godhead as the infinite *Ein Sof* (chapter 2), the golem as the mystic's magical creation/creature, perceived as a Greek tragic endeavor (chapter 3), alchemy

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<sup>13</sup> Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Sepher Yetzirah: The Book of Formation, and the Thirty Two Paths of Wisdom*, trans. Wm. Wynn Westcott (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), 22:  
<https://archive.org/details/sepheryetzirahb00rittgoog/page/n2/mode/2up>

<sup>15</sup> "The Godhead in itself in its absolute essence, lies beyond contemplative speculation or even ecstatic comprehension. The attitude of the Kabbalah towards God maybe defined as a mystical agnosticism" (Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* [New York: Dorset, 1987], 88).

<sup>16</sup> "Poema de los dones," in *Obras Completas*, 1:810.

<sup>17</sup> Jorge Louis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 117.

as the “science of the word” in practical Kabbalah (chapter 4). These varied topics all rest on a fundamental profound idea—namely, kabbalistic language, which Scholem refers to as “mystical symbolism” and Idel as “mythical philology.”<sup>18</sup> In a vital sense, this volume thus constitutes an attempt to trace the linguistic encounter between literary-poetic and theological-mystical language—in the form of a comparison between Borges’ fictional writings and the “intriguingly interwoven kabbalistic prose poems” (in the phraseology of Harold Bloom).<sup>19</sup> It should come as no surprise then that the enigmatic *Sefer Yetzira* frequently appears (as a white, lofty leviathan) in this study, being a book in which the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are elevated to the status of divine entities “hewed in the spirit”—i.e., as the instruments through which God has created the world.<sup>20</sup> Each chapter thus engages in an extensive theoretical discussion of the various strata of kabbalistic language: the letters as the primary elements and ontological source of creation; the symbolism and indirect communication of kabbalistic writing; the holy names and names of God as a divine microcosm; the sacred book as bearing infinite significance; the *Ein Sof* embodied in the first alphabetic letter, the *aleph*.

As I hope to demonstrate, the peerless perfection of kabbalistic language is not a marginal aspect of Borges’ writing but signifies and exemplifies in his view the possibility of absolute, unblemished language. It thus functions for him both as an escape route from the cruel sobriety of modern linguistic skepticism, and as a way to reinforce his idealistic tendencies, according to which reality is essentially immaterial. On a more personal level, we might say that Borges finds in kabbalistic language a deep mystical echo of the intuitive sense of existence of the “man of words” who passed his childhood lonely and alone in the silent expanses of his father’s library in Buenos Aires.

Finally, we should not leave unnoted the place Gershom Scholem holds throughout all the Borgesian kabbalistic discussions below. It is difficult to overestimate Scholem’s contribution to the study of Kabbalah, many—himself included—considering him to be the founder of modern academic kabbalistic research.<sup>21</sup> Anyone

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<sup>18</sup> Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 50; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom, “Preface,” in Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> The extent of the influence *Sefer Yetzira* exerts on Kabbalah is exemplified in Liebes’ pithy dictum: “The commentary to *Sefer Yetzira* is kabbalistic doctrine” (Yehuda Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzirah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2000), 244 (Hebrew)).

<sup>21</sup> Haviva Pedaya, “Aharit ha-davar: Zramim rashiyim ba-mistiqaq ha-yehudit ba-perspeqtiva shel megamot be-mehqara [Epilogue: Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism from the Perspective of Trends in

familiar with Kabbalah studies quickly becomes aware, however, that recent generations of scholars have begun questioning all his major premises. The criticism they level against him is serious: he overtheorizes kabbalistic text, imposes upon them a conceptual system of descriptive concepts drawn from European culture, being locked within the confines of a rigid paradigm arising from Johannes Reuchlin's sixteenth-century views. Idel even goes so far as to present Scholem as an embittered mystic who "in his own eyes was a sort of failure as a mystic, but yet yearned for mystical experiences."<sup>22</sup>

Borges appears not to have been aware of these objections—and certainly not sharing them. Scholem plays such a major role in his kabbalistic worldview that when Borges first came to Israel in 1969 he recounts: "When I was asked in Israel what I wanted to see, I said: Don't ask me what I want to see because I am blind, but if you ask me whom I want to meet I'll answer, right away, Scholem."<sup>23</sup> Not Agnon, the newly crowned winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, but the kabbalist scholar Scholem. The two met at Scholem's house twice. On the first occasion, in 1969, Scholem gave him a present of his books and the two engaged in a lengthy discussion of the Kabbalah. In his memoirs, Borges lauds Scholem's delicate manners and exquisite English, considering him his friend and happily recognizing the fact that the kabbalistic scholar (perhaps politely) confirmed his conjecture that the kabbalists privilege doctrine over method—i.e. the "what" over the "how."<sup>24</sup>

Scholem appears to have taken a less sanguine view than the enthusiastic Borges. In a letter to Edna Aizenberg, he remarked dryly that he did not know whether Borges had read his works before or after writing his "kabbalistic" fictions and that rather than presenting the Kabbalah in its historical form, he "offers the reader his insights with regard to his own imaginary perceptions of the kabbalists."<sup>25</sup> The disparate impressions the two men experienced may stem from differences in personality and

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its Study],” in Gershom Scholem, Cedric Cohen Skalli, Dov, Elboim, and Haviva Pedaya, *Zeramim rashiyim ba-mistiqah ha-yehudit* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2016), 357-451 (Hebrew).

<sup>22</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), introduction. Cf. Joseph Dan, “The Myth of Scholem”: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/2.602/print/1.1643943>

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>24</sup> “The Kabbalists arrived at a doctrine which was very different from the Jewish orthodoxy ... [they] thought that their doctrines of Neoplatonic or Gnostic origins were already in the Scripture. I have discussed this question with Scholem who, perhaps through sheer courtesy, approved this conjecture that the doctrine preceded the method” (ibid, 57-58).

<sup>25</sup> Edna Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges* (Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1985), 86.

temperament. At any rate, as Borges testified in an interview, the esoteric writings he read in translation being unintelligible in and of themselves, he regarded Scholem as a kabbalistic master:

The book I would like to recommend to you again and again is Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. This is the clearest work I have read on the subject.

Everything is explained there, not only stated but reasoned through and justified. Scholem goes beyond the great myths and the cosmic metaphors. Of the many books I have read on the Kabbalah, this is the only one that is written in an intimate manner. The others impress me as having been written by outsiders [...] Scholem, on the other hand, has composed his book from within. Something similar was achieved by Martin Buber in his book on Hasidism.<sup>26</sup>

Borges thus identifies Scholem's studies as decoding the inner philosophical core of the Kabbalah in the most lucid and clearest way possible. While they did not necessarily influence his own thought patterns or ideas, many of which he had already formed before reading Scholem, the two men seem to share a common perspective. They both approach the Kabbalah in a similar way, perhaps due to their common affection for German idealism—a stance that highlights the Neoplatonic, symbolic, and Gnostic features of kabbalistic thought.<sup>27</sup> Scholem's interpretation of Kabbalah thus sheds bright light on Borges' erudite and intricate kabbalistic writings.

A comparative enterprise between literature and theology calls not only for revealing the subtle and complex mutual relations between texts but also for placing the two perspectives on top of one another, as it were, thus creating a novel exegetical depth-perception of sorts that adds a further essential, difficult-to-grasp dimension to each of them. In the lofty words of the Zen poet Matsuo Bashō, this act of comparative juxtaposition will enable us to “explore what the sages sought rather than trace their footsteps”. This is also the ultimate goal of our present juxtaposition of fictional and mystical texts: namely, that through and by them, the reader can find a way to go beyond them.

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<sup>26</sup> Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Idel's critique of Scholem's over-theorization of Kabbalah in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 29f.