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In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah

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Dios (he dado en pensar) pone un empeño
En toda esa inasible arquitectura
Que edifica la luz con la tersura
Del cristal y la sombra con el sueño.

Dios ha creado las noches que se arman
De sueños y las formas del espejo
Para que el hombre sienta que es reflejo
Y vanidad. Por eso nos alarman.

Borges, "Los espejos"[1]

The crucial role that Kabbalah has played in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges has been the focus of a considerable number of academic studies.[2] George Steiner offers a lucid summary of the view espoused by

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. A. Coleman (New York, 1999), 106.

2. The literature on Borges and the Kabbalah is quite extensive; here I will list a select number of the relevant studies: Rabi, "Fascination de la Kabbale," *Cahiers de L'Herne* 4 (1964): 265–71; Saúl Sosnowski, "Borges y la Cábala: La búsqueda del Verbo," *Nuevos Aires* 8 (1972): 39–48; Sosnowski, "The God's Script—A Kabbalistic Quest," *Modern Fiction Studies* 19 (1973): 381–94; Sosnowski, "El verbo cabalístico de Borges," *Hispamérica* 3 (1975): 35–54; Sosnowski, *Borges y la Cábala: La búsqueda del verbo* (Buenos Aires, 1976); Edna Aizenberg, "Emma Zunz: A Kabbalistic Heroine in Borges's Fiction," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3 (1983): 223–35; Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges* (Potomac, Md., 1984), 85–107; Aizenberg, *Borges, el tejedor del Aleph y otros ensayos: Del hebraísmo al poscolonialismo* (Vervuert, 1997), 80–97; Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah, and Other Essays on His Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge, 1988), 3–53; Annette U. Flynn, *The Quest for God in the Work of Borges* (New York, 2009), 70–74; David E. Johnson, *Kant's Dog: On Borges,*

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various scholars when he describes Borges as the "third modern Kabbalist" along with Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem:

> We can locate in the poetry and fictions of Borges every motif present in the language mystique of Kabbalists and gnostics: the image of the world as a concatenation of secret syllables, the notion of an absolute idiom or cosmic letter—alpha and aleph—which underlies the rent fabric of human tongues, the supposition that the entirety of knowledge and experience is prefigured in a final tome containing all conceivable permutations of the alphabet. Borges advances the occult belief that the structure of ordinary time and space interpenetrates with alternative cosmologies, with consistent, manifold realities born of our speech and of the fathomless free energies of thought. The logic of his fables turns on a refusal of normal causality.[3]

My purpose in this essay is not to review the previous literature or even to present anything resembling a comprehensive analysis of the topic. Nor am I interested in tracing the influences on Borges, most notably the works of Scholem and Joshua Trachtenberg, to explain how he amassed his knowledge of Jewish mysticism, magic, and folklore. Instead, I will concentrate on three themes that run as threads through his short stories, essays, lectures, and poems: the image of the dream, the symbolic nature of the real, and the linear circularity of time. The appearance of these motifs in Borges's oeuvre certainly reflects an eclectic array of sources, but it seems to me that the kabbalistic inspiration in each instance is especially noteworthy.

Any discussion of Borges and the Kabbalah must begin with the obvious fact that he was not equipped to deal with this material historically or philologically, a point that he often emphasized on his own. Thus, he embarks on the subject in "A Defense of the Kabbalah" (1932) by confessing "almost complete ignorance of the Hebrew language."[4] Similarly, he commenced the lecture on Kabbalah delivered in 1970 at the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina by reminding the audience once more of his igno-

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Philosophy, and the Time of Translation (Albany, N.Y., 2012), 178–202; Oriol Poveda, "Abulafia in the Library: Comparing *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* and Borgesian Letter Combinations," available at http://www.ktavet.eu/files/Oriol_Poveda_art.pdf.

3. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1998), 70–71.

4. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. E. Weinberger, trans. E. Allen, S. J. Levine, and E. Weinberger (New York, 1999), 83.

rance of Hebrew and noting his perplexity over the various books on the subject that he had read over the years.[5] It was not false modesty, therefore, when he said in another lecture on Kabbalah, delivered in Buenos Aires at the Teatro Coliseo in 1977, "I have almost no right to be discussing this,"[6] or when he responded to Jaime Alazraki in an interview conducted (together with Willis Barnstone) in April 1980, "But really, since I don't know Hebrew I wonder if I have any right to study the Kabbalah."[7] Here it is apposite to recall a remark of Scholem that Edna Aizenberg recounts from a private letter (June 22, 1980) to the effect that Borges does not portray Kabbalah as "historical reality" but rather offers the reader "an insight into what the Kabbalists would have stood for in his own imagination."[8] Notwithstanding the basic soundness of this observation, I would tweak it by insisting that the chasm between the historical and the imaginative can be narrowed—indeed, Scholem's own historiography is at times based on documents that must be deemed fanciful reconstructions of what allegedly took place in time, a point that has not commanded sufficient scholarly attention.[9] I readily grant that Borges set out primarily to depict how the kabbalists stood in his imagination; however, in the process, he displayed a startlingly intuitive grasp of some of the rudimentary principles of Jewish esotericism that not only rivals but on occasion even surpasses the formulations of specialists in the field.

Let me initiate my analysis by noting Borges's conviction, placed in the

5. Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 54.

6. Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights*, trans. E. Weinberger (New York, 1984), 97.

7. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*, ed. W. Barnstone (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), 82.

8. Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver*, 86, n. 2.

9. One of the most glaring examples is Scholem's masterful study of the Sabbatian movement. To the best of my knowledge, no one has examined carefully the historicity of the sources used by Scholem in reconstructing the narrative about this pseudomessianic movement. It is worth recalling as well that Scholem concludes his study *Sabbatai Ṣevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton, N.J., 1973) with an image from 1687 that he describes as the "fantastic engraving of Sabbatai Ṣevi bringing back the Jews to Israel." That this massive study, which purports to be a history of Sabbatianism in the seventeenth century, should end with an engraving that depicts the fantasy of the redeemer leading the Jews to Palestine is revealing. The iconography lends support to Scholem's thesis that the tragedy of this movement was that it severed the symbolic from the historical. For discussion of this theme and citation of relevant passages from Scholem, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Engenderment of Messianic Politics: Symbolic Significance of Sabbatai Ṣevi's Coronation," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, ed. P. Schäfer and M. Cohen (Leiden, 1998), 203–17.

mouth of the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher in "Averroës' Search" (1949), that the desire for innovation is illiterate and vain.[10] This sentiment is rooted in Borges's conception of the nonlinearity of time,[11] exemplified, for instance, in the assertion in "Kafka and His Precursors" (1951) that every writer creates his or her own precursors and thereby modifies the past as much as the future.[12] The Borgesian perspective has much affinity with the kabbalistic dialectic of tradition and innovation: what is new is new in virtue of being old and what is old is old in virtue of being new. Some years ago, I opined that the presentation of ostensibly unprecedented ideas in the academic world is the converse of the reigning strategy deployed in the political arena, where the radically new is often packaged as the old and tested. I surmised, moreover, that in scholarly disciplines that are more concerned with safeguarding territory and exercising domination—sometimes through hegemony masked in the guise of Derridean *différance*—the more a position is promulgated as revolutionary, the more legitimating and empowering it becomes.[13] Decades of investigating kabbalistic works assiduously, combined with immersion in the study of phenomenology, has confirmed the insight: it is precisely in iteration that novelty is to be sought, since the newness of the present can only be calibrated from the expectation of the past that will be in the recollection of the future that has been. This I mark as one of the critical similarities between the kabbalists and Borges: time is perceived as an "inexhaustible labyrinth," which exhibits the chaos and indeterminacy of the dream.[14]

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10. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. A. Hurley (New York, 1998), 241.

11. Consider the comment of Borges in "Circular Time" (1941) that the most "conceivable" interpretation of the doctrine of eternal return is that there are "similar but not identical cycles" (Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 226). For a recent sophisticated philosophical analysis of Borges's reflections on time, see Johnson, *Kant's Dog*, 25–43. See also Flynn, *The Quest*, 61–82.

12. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 365. Borges's perspective on creativity and novelty is well summarized in André Maurois's preface in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (New York, 1964), xix: "Borges is always quick to confess his sources and borrowings, because for him no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes."

13. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford, 2007), 212, n. 16.

14. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 321. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York, 2011), 15; 276–77, n. 6.

The oneiric texture of time as a linear circle is far more essential than the ordinary sense of temporality conceived in chronoscopic terms as the progression from the past through the present to the future; within the dreamscape, the line may be reversed—perhaps the swerve is a more suitable geometric image—so that the future is as much determinative of the past as the past is of the future. With this disruption of the more conventional understanding of temporal succession, the commonsense assumption regarding the identity of an enduring self is in jeopardy. In the opening paragraph of the first version of the essay "A New Refutation of Time" (1944), Borges proclaimed that while he did not believe in this refutation, the latter would visit him nocturnally "with the illusory force of a truism" and that, in one way or another, this concern is found in all of his books.[15] Building more specifically on the idealism of Berkeley, Borges reaches the conclusion that "there is not, behind the face, a secret self governing our acts or receiving our impressions; we are only the series of those imaginary acts and those errant impressions."[16] Just as Hume had denied the existence of absolute space, so we must deny the "existence of one single time, in which all events are linked. To deny coexistence is no less difficult than to deny succession."[17] From one vantage point, the denial of succession removes the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future, leaving us only the present,[18] but from another vantage point, this denial facilitates the possibility of bending the timeline, so that the past and the future assume a tangible presence as real as the present. Reading, in particular, is an activity in which the modes of time can be inverted. As Borges hypothesizes, "Are the enthusiasts who devote themselves to a line of Shakespeare not literally Shakespeare?"[19]

In the second version of this essay (1946), Borges reworks the discussion of idealism by adding some comments on the phenomenon of the dream. There is dreaming, he insists, but no dreamer or even a dream. The point is illumined by the renowned example of Chaung Tzu, who dreamed that he was a butterfly but upon waking did not know if he was a man who dreamed that he was a butterfly or a butterfly who dreamed that he was a man. Borges observes that we may infer from this tale that "the chronological determination of an event, of any event in the world,

15. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 318.
16. Ibid., 321.
17. Ibid., 322.
18. Ibid., 227.
19. Ibid., 323.

is alien and exterior to the event. In China, the dream of Chaung Tzu is proverbial; let us imagine that one of its almost infinite readers dreams he is a butterfly and then that he is Chaung Tzu. Let us imagine that, by a not impossible chance, this dream repeats exactly the dream of the master. Having postulated such an identity, we may well ask: Are not these coinciding moments identical?"[20] The historicity of the story is irrelevant; indeed, the repetition of the event not only confounds the possibility of historical demarcation but reveals that there is no history to demarcate as such that is not intertwined with the proverbial function of the tale, which continues to shed light on the shifting nature of self-identity and the obfuscation of the distinction between dream and reality.

Touching upon the same theme at the end of "A Dialog between Dead Men" (1960), Borges has Quiroga say to Rosas, "Maybe I'm not cut out to be dead, but this place and this conversation seem like a dream to me, and not a dream that *I* am dreaming, either. More like a dream dreamed by somebody else, somebody that's not born yet."[21] Consistent with an approach that may be elicited from many kabbalistic treatises, Borges fathomed the mystery of time as a permanent impermanence that casts everything as concomitantly the same because intermittently different.[22] In that sense, time is both reversible and irreversible; it is one because it is the other. This conclusion is seemingly contradicted by the ending of "A New Refutation of Time" where Borges writes that while we may deny temporal succession and the identity of self, what we fear most is the ironclad irreversibility of time and the fact that we are constituted by the very torrents of time—compared metaphorically to the tiger, river, and fire—that extinguish us. Borges thus ends the essay with the memorable lament: "The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges."[23] Prima facie, it might appear as if Borges repudiates the ancient wisdom that identifies the world as a dream and the fixed self as illusory.[24] I would argue, to the contrary, that he is communicating ironically that the affirmation of the reality of the world and of the self is an integral part of the dream.

In the aforementioned 1970 lecture on Kabbalah, Borges remarked,

20. Ibid., 330.

21. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 306 (emphasis in original).

22. See analysis in Wolfson, *A Dream*, 228.

23. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 332.

24. Regarding the impermanence of the self, Borges was also influenced by Buddhist philosophy. See Borges, *Seven Nights*, 71–72; Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 349–50. Flynn (*The Quest*, 121–22) argues that Borges did not reconcile himself to the Buddhist theory of no-self.

"The Kabbalists lacked a historical perception and did not believe that language preceded writing. They stated explicitly that the existence of the letters preceded language."[25] I will return to the second part of this statement, but for the moment I wish to focus on the first, a rather extraordinary observation. Repeatedly, the reader encounters this view of history enunciated in Borges's narratives wherein the line between fiction and fact is clearly blurred. The point is epitomized, for example, in "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1939). Responding to the claim of the seventeenth-century Cervantes, "truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor," Borges writes:

> History, the *mother* of truth!—the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not "what happened"; it is what we *believe* happened. The final phrases—*exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor*—are brazenly pragmatic.[26]

It is not implausible to presume that with this exegetical gloss Borges was expressing his own view. Far from being the measure of factual truth, history is merely what we deem to have taken place. As he put it in the closing lines of the poem "All Those Yesterdays, A Dream" (1985):

> A whole mythology dripping with blood
> that now is yesterday. The learned history
> of classrooms is no less illusory
> than that mythology of nothingness.
> The past is clay shaped by the present's whim.
> Then shaped again, and reshaped without end.[27]

But is Borges justified in ascribing this stance to the kabbalists en masse? Needless to say, some scholars of Jewish mysticism would fault him for essentializing a phenomenon as multifaceted as the Kabbalah. I myself am susceptible to this postmodern sensibility and the celebration of the

25. Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 56.

26. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 94 (emphasis in original).

27. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Sonnets*, ed. S. Kessler (New York, 2010), 281. On Borges's conception of historical representation, see Mark Frisch, *You Might Be Able to Get There from Here: Reconsidering Borges and the Postmodern* (Madison, Wisc., 2004), 113–29.

singular. I would argue nonetheless that we might learn something from the artist's willingness to generalize. The contention that kabbalists lacked historical perception can withstand the test of textual scrutiny, if it is understood that what is intended is that the symbolic intent bestows meaning on historical events, a paradigm that is based on the esoteric decoding of scriptural narratives. I would go so far as to say that this is the kabbalistic Archimedean point. As Borges famously put it in the beginning of "The Mirror of Enigmas" (1952):

> The idea that the Sacred Scriptures have (aside from their literal value) a symbolic value is ancient and not irrational: it is found in Philo of Alexandria, in the Cabalists, in Swedenborg. Since the events related in the Scriptures are true . . . we should admit that men, in acting out those events, blindly represent a secret drama determined and premeditated by God. Going from this to the thought that the history of the universe—and in it our lives and the most tenuous detail of our lives—has an incalculable, symbolical value, is a reasonable step.[28]

It behooves me to add that positing a perspective of this sort does not mean that one has succumbed to reductionism or essentialism. On the contrary, as I have argued in previous publications,[29] cohesion of structure does not preclude permutation and diversity; adherence to tradition is what engenders interpretative fluctuation, the sense of the whole that I envision is disjointed, a totality imparted through fragmentation, and hence replication is the algorithm for variation. The tendency to generalize should not be misconstrued as an argument to view the variegated history of Jewish mystical doctrines and practices monolithically. It is feasible, indeed mandatory, to speak of kabbalistic lore in terms of structures of thought that persist through time. Repetition of these structures does not bespeak an ontological condition that suppresses difference in the name of sameness.

The history of kabbalism as a religious phenomenon illustrates that the presumed immutability of system occasions novel interpretation in the image of enchainment invoked by Borges to explain the dictum *magister*

28. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 209. Compare Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver*, 86–90.

29. See, for instance, Elliot R. Wolfson, "Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18 (2007): 149–59; Wolfson, "The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 19 (2009): 170–72; Wolfson, *A Dream*, 257–58.

dixit associated with Pythagoras.[30] The simultaneity of truth as novel and erstwhile is a fundamental hermeneutical axiom—linked to the conception of time in its most elementary form as an instant of diremptive reiteration, the renewal of the same as different in the renewal of the different as same, the eternal recurrence of what cannot recur except as the nonrecurrence of what has recurred.[31] System, consequently, is precisely what accounts for interruption of order by chaos, the intervention of the moment that renders the flow of time continuously discontinuous and discontinuously continuous. The recognition of multiplicity does not negate unity, if we understand the latter as a system that comprises multiple subsystems, an economy of meaning that incorporates a plurality of economies.[32]

To return to the main point: a basic tenet of the kabbalistic mindset from the Middle Ages—although its roots are much older, as Borges well understood[33]—is that terrestrial events should be viewed as symbolic of the dynamic potencies in the divine pleroma. The parallelism between the ontic and the hermeneutic revolves about this axis: just as the scriptural text betrays a twofold sense, such that the internal is discerned through the guise of the external rather than by discarding it—to see the spirit through the garment of the letter rather than by removing it[34]—so, too, the supernal realm of divine potencies cannot be comprehended except through the material façade of the terrestrial realm. In sync with Henry Corbin's observation concerning Islamic esotericism,[35] I would suggest this is the central postulate of Jewish esotericism as well: the corporeal world is the textual embodiment of the divine light, which is the name that comprises the totality of the Hebrew alphabet. To be even more precise, the homology between the divine and the mundane rests on the fact that the constituent element of matter on both planes is the letter. What exists in the world is the sundry permutations of the twenty-two

30. Borges, *Seven Nights*, 97.

31. Here my thinking about time can be profitably compared to the Deleuzian interpretation of Nietzsche. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York, 1994), 41; Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (London, 1983), 48.

32. I have here repeated some of the formulation in Wolfson, "Structure," 156.

33. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 204: "In the hermetic books, it is written that 'things below are as things above, and things above as things below'; the *Zohar* tells us that the lower world is a reflection of the higher."

34. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 56–110, esp. 73–74.

35. Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, N.J., 1969), 78.

Hebrew letters, branches of the tree whose trunk is the Tetragrammaton, the secret essence of the Torah.[36]

From this vantage point, as Borges astutely noted, the description of history in Léon Bloy's *L'Âme de Napoléon*, cited in "The Mirror of Enigmas," as an "immense liturgical text where the iotas and the dots are worth no less than the entire verses or chapters, but the importance of one and the other is indeterminable and profoundly hidden," is nothing more than an application of the method that kabbalists utilized in reading Scripture to the whole of creation.[37] The world is likened to the "absolute text"[38] in which everything is predetermined and yet whose meaning remains indeterminate, since each letter potentially alludes to an infinite surplus that can never be fully exhausted at any given temporal interval. Already in "A Defense of the Kabbalah," Borges speculated that the premise postulated by the kabbalists, which is in accord with the "pre-Augustinian theory of verbal inspiration, that God dictates, word by word, what he proposes to say," turns Scripture "into an absolute text, where the collaboration of chance is calculated at zero . . . A book impervious to contingencies, a mechanism of infinite purposes, of infallible variations, of revelations lying in wait, of superimpositions of light."[39] The truth enfolded in the text, therefore, must be unfolded indefinitely in a never-ending process of semiosis.

This endless play of recovery by uncovering yields the epistemic maxim that there is no naked truth to behold but only truth garbed in the mantle of truth, which is to say, the veil of untruth. Borges understood that this is the implication of the kabbalists viewing the Torah as a "sacred book" in which the "infinite intelligence has condescended," a belief that he rightly points out "is as incredible as imagining that God condescended to become a man."[40] Without the benefit of philological training, Borges appreciated that the dominant discursive narratives of Christians and kabbalists both presume a correlation of body and book, but in an

36. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005), 197–202, and see reference to other scholars cited on 422, n. 251.

37. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 211.

38. On the notion of the "absolute book" in Borges, see Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver*, 90–99.

39. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 85–86.

40. Borges, *Seven Nights*, 98. Compare the similar formulation, albeit limited to the book of Genesis, in "A Defense of the Kabbalah," in Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 85: "The Kabbalists believed, as many Christians now do, in the divinity of that story, in its deliberate writing by an infinite intelligence."

inverse manner, since for the former, the literal body is embodied in the book of the body, whereas for the latter, the literal body is embodied in the body of the book.[41] For all the appeal to plurivocality, I have yet to find one kabbalist who would not concur with the proposition that the nature of material beings is constituted by the Hebrew letters through which they were created. Hebrew has been viewed unconditionally by proponents of the Kabbalah as the primal language, the *Ursprache*, which is purportedly the source to which all other languages may be traced. Nothing, to the best of my knowledge, is comparable in medieval Western Christianity or even in Eastern Orthodoxy. The legacy of the Johannine prologue regarding the word made flesh did not result in the logos being restricted to any one linguistic matrix even if the original text was written in Greek. Be that as it may, the decisive point for our purposes is that Borges was finely attuned to the incarnational element of the kabbalistic orientation, expressed above all in theorizing the nature of the world as the textual embodiment of the name that comprises the Hebrew letters, an overturning of the semantic hierarchy that has prevailed in Western thought by granting precedence to the written over the spoken. "When we think of words," writes Borges, "we think historically: that words were first spoken and then later they became composed of letters. In contrast, the Kabbalah . . . believes that the letters came first, that they were instruments of God, not the words signified by the letters. It is as if one were to think of writing, contrary to experience, as older than the speaking of the language."[42]

Lest one protest that we should make a distinction here between the two major schools of Kabbalah, the theosophic and the prophetic, I would counter that this is one of several essential matters that cuts across the typological taxonomy that has dominated kabbalistic scholarship. According to both forms of Kabbalah, what transpires in the historical

41. For an expanded discussions of the incarnational tendencies of both the theosophic and the prophetic Kabbalah, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 190–260; Wolfson, "The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005): 479–500; Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body: Abraham Abulafia's Polemic With Christianity," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, ed. D. Engel, L. H. Schiffman, and E. R. Wolfson (Leiden, 2012), 89–226.

42. Borges, *Seven Nights*, 99. Compare the sources cited by Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver*, 92, n. 12, to which may be added my own essay "Erasing the Erasure: Gender and the Writing of God's Body in Kabbalistic Symbolism," in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, N.Y., 1995), 49–78.

arena has import only as it is interpreted with reference to the Tetragrammaton, the one true reality that comprises the Hebrew letters, which are the material expression of the *ʾefirot*, whether understood as potencies of the divine or as personifications of the immaterial intellects that serve as the channels through which the efflux of God overflows into and sustains the universe. For all of Abraham Abulafia's disagreement with other kabbalists of his day, he did not take issue with this vital point: what is literally true is the figuration of that which has no figure—the divine essence or the necessary of existence—and thus human beings do not have the ability to grasp reality divested of a metaphorical or symbolic veneer.

As a number of scholars have noted, this dimension of the Kabbalah had a profound impact on Borges. In the Alazraki-Barnstone interview, he declared that his chief attraction to the Kabbalah was the belief that the "whole world is merely a system of symbols, that the whole world, including the stars, stood for God's secret writing."[43] What has been less accentuated is that the penchant to view reality symbolically underlies Borges's fascination with the oneiric imagination, which he identified as the locus of artistic creation.[44] Even more poignantly, in a second remark in this interview, Borges responded to a question about gnosticism:

> I suppose life, I suppose the world, is a nightmare, but I can't escape from it and am still dreaming it. And I cannot reach salvation . . . Yet I do my best and I find salvation to be the act of writing, of going in for writing in a rather hopeless way . . . My fate is to think of all things, of all experiences, as having been given me for the purpose of making beauty out of them. I know that I have failed, I'll keep on failing, but still that is the only justification for my life.[45]

The only salvation afforded Borges is through fulfilling his destiny as a writer, which consists of the ability to dream in a world that is a nightmare. Politics, history, economics, the pursuit of material wealth, religious faith, all are illusions; the mirage of the dream alone is real.[46]

Let me return at this juncture to the epigraph of this essay, which I will cite here in English translation:

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43. *Borges at Eighty*, 82.
44. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 427.
45. *Borges at Eighty*, 83.
46. Ibid., 89.

God (I've begun to think) implants a promise
in all that insubstantial architecture
that makes light out of the impervious surface
of glass, and makes the shadow out of dreams.

God has created nights well-populated
With dreams, crowded with mirror images,
So that man may feel that he is nothing more
Than vain reflection. That's what frightens us.[47]

Ostensibly, these verses have nothing to do with Kabbalah or indeed with anything specifically Jewish. And yet I would contend that encapsulated in them is a reverberation of one of the key ideas disseminated by the kabbalists, an idea that goes to the heart of their cosmology and mystical piety.[48] I refer to the archaic wisdom, mentioned above, that blurs the line between dream and reality. This teaching, which probably originated in Chinese Confucianism and Daoism and was then transported into the well-known Hindu doctrine of *māyā*, which in turn informed all schools of Buddhism,[49] and eventually found its way into both Islamic and Jewish mystical sources, is predicated on the insight that the spatio-temporal world is but a dream. Enlightenment, accordingly, entails waking from the dream that we are dreaming that we are waking from the dream. For those who walk the pathless path, the dream morphs into a double delusion, the verity of which is apprehended when one comes to know that one is dreaming while one is dreaming—what is known in scientific terms as lucid dreaming—and in so doing, one sees the cloud through the transparency that is the cloud, or to paraphrase Borges's trope, one discerns that the dream is a fiction within the fiction that we delineate as life.[50]

47. Borges, *Selected Poems*, 107.

48. I am here drawing on the fuller analysis in Wolfson, *A Dream*, 255–74. My approach is to be distinguished from Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 24, who argues that the "one difference" that separates the worldview of the Kabbalah and that of Borges expressed in "The Circular Ruins" relates to the fact that for the latter "every man's reality is a dream and the god who is dreaming us is himself a dream," whereas for the former "God makes His creatures according to secret formulas that He alone knows." My interpretation of the kabbalistic sources diminishes the difference enunciated by Alazraki.

49. In "Forms of a Legend" (1952), Borges made this very point. See Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 376.

50. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 160. See ibid., 162: "Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that dreaming and wakefulness are the pages of a single book, and that to read them in order is to live, and to leaf through them at random, to dream.

The one who is illumined from the dream within the dream is situated in the state of irreality between dream and waking that is well captured by Borges in his description of the dream as a mirror image through which we can see how the light is made out of the impermeable surface of glass and how the shadow is made out of dreams.[51] The juxtaposition of these metaphors forges a link between the glass surface and the dream, on the one hand, and the light and the shadow, on the other hand. Dreams are the speculum through which the light is refracted as shadows cast upon the scaffold of experience, consigning the substance of all that exists to a simulacrum of a simulacrum, a phantom not of some inner reality but of another phantom dreamt in the mind of some dreamer.[52] As Borges writes about the "mystical aim" of the protagonist in "The Circular Ruins" (1940): "The goal that led him on was not impossible, though it was clearly supernatural: He wanted to dream a man. He wanted to dream him completely, in painstaking detail, and impose him upon reality."[53]

We are fearful of the exposure of this truth because the dream fosters the appearance of the inapparent, disclosing thereby the limit delimited and yet breached by the imagination in unveiling the image whence it is disclosed that the dream can be phenomenally present only in being ontically absent. Since the self of the dreamer is constituted by the phantasmagoria of the dream that it constitutes, we are justified in speaking of the occlusion of the dreamer's subjectivity in the creases of the dream. Borges is mindful of the fact that this realization may prove to be a source

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Paintings within paintings and books that branch into other books help us sense this oneness."

51. On the effacing of the boundary between the real and the unreal in Borges, see Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 26. The author rightly points out that this blurring can take the form of viewing life either as "an illusion when presented as a dream somebody is dreaming or as a line of a book that somebody is writing." The interchangeability of the mirror and the dream in Borges is noted by Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 109–10. See also the discussion of the paradigm and irreality in Mary Lusky Friedman, *The Emperor's Kites: A Morphology of Borges' Tales* (Durham, N.C., 1987), 109–53.

52. Compare the passage from "Covered Mirrors" in Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 297: "As a child, I knew that horror of the spectral duplication or multiplication of reality, but mine would come as I stood before large mirrors. As soon as it began to grow dark outside, the constant, infallible functioning of mirrors, the way they followed my every movement, their cosmic pantomime, would seem eerie to me. One of my insistent pleas to God and my guardian angel was that I not dream of mirrors; I recall clearly that I would keep one eye on them uneasily."

53. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 97.

of great existential and psychological angst. In the solemn poem "I Am Not Even Dust," Borges expressed the conundrum that one must face when the self is specularized through the medium of the dream:

> My visage (which I have not seen)
> Has never cast its image in the mirror.
> I am not even dust. I am a dream
> That weaves itself in sleep and wakefulness. [. . .]
> That I might be allowed to dream the other
> Whose fertile memory will be a part
> Of all the days of man, I humbly pray:
> My God, my dreamer, keep on dreaming me.[54]

The dream is the phantasm that allows the poet to see the chimerical nature of the phantasm that he imagines to be the immutable self that he does not want to be. Both self and God are nothing but dreamers confabulated within the topography of the dream.[55] Gazing through the prism of the dream, we discern the invariable and unsettling truth that the image is true to the degree that it is false and false to the degree that it is true. Transposing the Platonic model, we can speak of the dream as the semblance of the simulacrum par excellence wherein truth is not opposed epistemically to error, since the appearance of truthfulness cannot be determined independently of the truthfulness of appearance. To be sure, many cultures have upheld the distinction between true and false dreams, or between real and imagined dreams, but within the dream there is no epistemological measure to distinguish truth and falsehood. To say a dream is either true or false is a retrospective value judgment that we apply to what we consider to be real or unreal based on a complex lattice of beliefs—theological, cosmological, anthropological, or psychological—that are extraneous to the dream and therefore irrelevant with regard to the immediacy of the irreal, which is the basic stuff whence dreams are made. We may assume that there is a breach between what is imagined to be real and what is really imagined—indeed this may be necessary to preserve our sanity—but nothing in the narrative yarn of the dream vali-

54. Jorge Luis Borges, *Poems of the Night*, ed. E. Kristal (New York, 2010), 125–27.

55. On the nothingness of the self and God in Borges, see Flynn, *The Quest*, 37–60. Here we would do well to recall Borges's comment in an interview conducted in September 1971 with Alazraki, cited in *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 6: "And then, since I have not been able to believe in a personal God, the idea of a vast and impersonal God, the *En-Sof* of the Kabbalah, has always fascinated me."

dates unraveling the threads of veracity from deception. Within the contours of the dream, the truth of the image consists veritably of its being false. Dream images are true because they exist, but they exist as false; they are not what they appear to be and thus appear not to be what they are. Borges reaches this very conclusion after probing in the "Avatars of the Tortoise" (1939) the paradoxes of Zeno and the antinomies of Kant: "We (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason which tell us it is false."[56]

It is logically impossible to rule out the possibility that what we estimate to be wakefulness is but a dream, perhaps a dream that one is waking from a dream. The articulation of this insight in the kabbalistic sources is connected to the rabbinic view, which reflects an older Near Eastern mantic convention, that the dream phenomenon should be treated principally as a text, and the corollary assumption that dream interpretation is a form of exegesis.[57] This comparison was expressed chiefly in one of two ways, either as the importation of exegetical techniques from the oneirocritica familiar to the rabbis to their own midrashic practices or in the application of the canons of scriptural interpretation developed by the rabbis to the analysis of dreams. In either case, the rabbis' thinking is informed by a circularity of reasoning: just as the reader actively participates in the creation of the meaning of the text—indeed, interpretation may even be seen as part of the constitution of the text, including the manner in which a particular verse is vocalized—that gives shape to the identity of the reader, so the dreamer weaves the dream through which the dreamer is woven. The interpretative token, as it were, transmutes the mimetic relationship of representation and represented, and, in the process, upends the conventional hierarchy of appearance and reality; the latter is as much shaped by the former as the former is by the latter, and hence there is no way to fathom the text of the dream but through the cloak of interpretation and no way to remove the cloak of the dream but through the text of interpretation.

The talmudic textual motif that the dream is a text that must be interpreted evolved into a major theme in later mystical texts and it appears in several zoharic homilies,[58] of which I will here mention one from the

56. Borges, *Labyrinths*, 208.

57. For a more comprehensive analysis of this motif, see Wolfson, *A Dream*, 143–77. The material here is derived from that discussion.

58. Wolfson, *A Dream*, 162–69.

beginning of the literary stratum known as the *Saba de-mishpatim*.[59] After stating categorically that the Torah does not consist of "words of a dream," whose meaning is determined by the mouth that interprets them but which must still be interpreted in a manner that corresponds to the dream, the zoharic author insists that with respect to scriptural words, the "delights of the holy king," it is even more imperative that they be rendered in concurrence with the "way of truth," even though each one embraces countless, if not infinite, "words of wisdom." The contrast between the dream and the Torah only underscores the element that ties the two together: just as a dream has a manifest and a latent meaning, so the literal word of Scripture comprises hidden meanings that must be extracted through skillful exegesis. In the final analysis, however, what makes the oneiric condition commensurate to esoteric knowledge is that the formless object of the contemplative vision—the name that is incarnate in the body of the text—can be seen only in the imaginal forms in which it (dis)appears, the sefirotic potencies configured in the heart, and thus there is no substantial difference between appearance and reality. The dream, as metaphor, is a transference that presupposes a gap continuously crossed and hence never collapsed, an opening that begets the merger of dissimilar entities without resolution of their difference. Rendered metaphorically, the metaphor is the bridge that spans the breach between literal and figurative, truth and fiction, the verbal leap that propels one across the space of an irreducible reducibility. Metaphor—both as a movement of thought as well as a rhetorical analogue for the ontology of existence—is a form of language that materializes in the fissure that connects by keeping apart.

Faithful to this facet of Jewish esotericism, Borges concluded the parable "Everything and Nothing" (1960) with the following dialogue between the divine voice and the anonymous poet/actor, a cipher no doubt for the author himself:

> History adds that before or after he died, he discovered himself standing before God, and said to Him: *I, who have been so many men in vain, wish to be one, to be myself*. God's voice answered him out of a whirlwind: *I, too, and not I; I dreamed the world as you, Shakespeare, dreamed your own*

59. Zohar 2:98b. For previous notable discussions of this passage, see Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Eros" (Hebrew), *Alpayim* 9 (1994): 87–88; Oded Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba de-Mishpatim of the Zohar* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 2005), 255–59.

work, and among the forms of my dream are you, who like me are many, yet no one.[60]

With the brilliant brevity characteristic of his aesthetic virtuosity, Borges has captured succinctly one of the deepest secrets of the Kabbalah, the belief that the phenomenal world is a dream from which one must awaken by waking to the dream that one is merely dreaming that one is awake. Like the masters of Jewish esoteric lore, Borges grasped the truth that there is no way to access the truth beyond image except through the dissimilitude of the image that is the dream we call reality.

60. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 320 (emphasis in original).