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FORUM

Editor's Introduction: Jorge Luis Borges and the Jewish Question

One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century—and indeed one of the greatest never to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature—was the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). Borges was a master innovator in style, a compelling and ceaselessly inventive storyteller, and an unusually probing philosophical writer. He was also a deeply committed citizen of his country and the world, whose fiction engaged with major political and ethical concerns of the day. Despite a brief and atypical period in the 1970s in which he expressed sympathy for the dictatorial regimes of Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina and Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Borges tended to find himself on the right side of history, using his extraordinary writerly talent to strip away the façade of toxic political ideologies. Among his chief targets were the intersecting currents of fascism and anti-Semitism, which he observed with growing trepidation in the 1920s and 1930s.

Part of what animated Borges's critique of anti-Semitism was a deep and almost obsessive sense of connection to Jews and Judaism. This connection was first nurtured in Geneva, where he moved with his family in 1914 and where he gained his first formative insights into Jewish literature and culture, in part through a close friendship with two Jewish boys. From that point forward, Borges felt a powerful bond to the Jewish tradition—to the point that fascist sympathizers back in his native Argentine accused him of being Jewish. Rather than curb or conceal his feelings, he responded to his fascist critics in Argentina in 1934 with courageous directness in an essay, "Yo, Judio" (I, a Jew). He was not in fact Jewish, but he declared that he wished he were, given his heartfelt admiration for Jews and Judaism.

Borges's sense of identification was based on not only his adolescent friendships but also an engagement with Jewish history and thought that was neither superficial nor fleeting. Concomitant with his sharp condem-

nation of anti-Semitism, Borges developed a deep interest in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah. His 1932 essay "A Defense of the Kabbalah" launched a lifetime of investigation into the subject, nurtured by his voracious reading of modern scholars, including and especially his friend in Jerusalem, Gershom Scholem. In "A Defense of Kabbalah," Borges admitted to his "almost complete ignorance of the Hebrew language" but further elaborated that he was motivated to delve into the esoteric Jewish tradition by "my desire to defend not the doctrine but rather the hermeneutical or cryptographic procedures that lead to it." Perhaps his most renowned fictional engagement with those procedures came in his story "El Aleph" (The Aleph), from 1945. Attuned to the great symbolic importance that kabbalists place on the Hebrew letters in their cosmological universe, especially the first (*aleph*), Borges depicts a mysterious phenomenon, an "aleph" described as a lens that opens up perspectives on the entire universe, from all possible angles at once. Through it one peers into infinity—a recurrent motif in Borges's writing, as well as a central concept in the Kabbalah, denoting the boundless power of God.

Gazing into infinity, or grasping the ultimate meaning of letters of the Hebrew alphabet, were not simple matters. They were tasks burdened by the inherent limitations of the human mind. But those limitations inspired, in turn, manifold waves of interpretive ingenuity in hopes of gaining a proximate understanding of the infinite. Borges seized on that relentless quest to grasp that which could not be fully grasped to reflect not only on the Kabbalah but on the nature of the world more broadly. His fiction was animated by the desire for the ever elusive goal of epistemological certainty, resulting in the creation of a dream-like fantastical world in which one's sense of reality was altogether shaken.

Both the Kabbalah and, to a great extent, the Jewish condition at large gave Borges a language to represent this world. It is in this regard that Borges has become a figure of interest in and to the field of Jewish studies. Accordingly, the editors of *JQR* believe that it is fitting to explore Borges's imaginative and philosophical universe in our pages. Toward that end, we have assembled a diverse trio of distinguished scholars to reflect on the great Argentine writer and the Jewish question in his work.

Edna Aizenberg opens the forum with an intriguing question: "Would Borges have been 'Borges' without World War II and the Shoah?" Aizenberg answers this question by demonstrating the depth of Borges's preoccupation with the plight of Jews as an organizing principle in his writing. She reviews his early biography (in Switzerland, Spain, and Argentina), as well as his early fiction in the 1920s, to make this point,

before homing in on his writing in the 1930s and 1940s, when he came to confront directly the perversity of Nazism as a political and cultural project. Incurring enemies along the way who reviled his liberal and pro-Jewish sentiments, Borges permitted himself to ponder, in his dream-like fictional mode, the terrifying prospect of a Nazi triumph against the civilized world, culminating in the possible eradication of the Jews. The events of the day so exceeded, as Jean-François Lyotard would later note, the capacity for cognitive comprehension as to encourage Borges's own literary instinct to blur the boundary between fact and fiction, reality and dream. In this regard, Aizenberg notes, "Borges's *ficciones*"—in which "lo hebreo" plays a central role—"are a response to the impossibility of representing contemporary history with bequeathed techniques."

This new representational approach, born both of literary imagination and historical circumstance, stands at the center of Efrain Kristal's meditation on the place of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Borges's work. After charting some early influences, Kristal devotes his attention to a number of short stories and essays that Borges wrote dealing with Nazism from the 1940s to the 1970s. Of particular interest to Kristal is "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), to which Borges appended a fictional postscript dated 1947. The story describes the creation of a parallel universe, Tlön, that is conjured into existence by a group of conspirators who are inspired by an encyclopedia article about a country called Uqbar. As with the transformation wrought by totalitarian ideology, the story exemplifies, Kristal shows, that "one need only imagine an object for it to materialize." This act of cognitive conjuring of a parallel universe has the effect, consistent with Borges's frequent literary tack, of obscuring the line between fantasy and realism—an impulse illustrated by the fictional postscript that speaks of the triumph of Nazism as an established historical fact. Kristal concludes his essay by noting that in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," as well as in a number of other Borges's stories that he analyzes, the reader is exposed to a set of "insights and realizations that mere realism might not be able to offer."

The third contribution to the forum, Elliot R. Wolfson's "In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah," picks up at that point. Rather than focus on the scourge of Nazism, Wolfson draws on his own field of expertise, Jewish mysticism, to highlight a series of interrelated themes that express Borges's recurrent epistemological queries: "the image of the dream, the symbolic nature of the real, and the linear circularity of time." Borges did not come to these overlapping queries entirely on his own. He was aided, Wolfson notes, by "a startlingly intuitive grasp of some of the rudimentary principles of Jewish esotericism." Indeed,

notwithstanding his lack of Hebrew, Borges understood as deeply as any kabbalist the profound, perplexing, and seemingly contradictory proposition 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." Embedded in this complex web of hermeneutic circles, the kabbalist—or, in Borges's case, the modern author—strives but fails to break through the bounds to locate a salvific Archimidean point.

But in fact, for Wolfson, this predicament of never fully escaping the circles is neither a trap nor a liability. Rather, it is an opportunity to discover the truth that dwells in the continuum between the dream state and reality. This insight recalls for us the representational mode that Jorge Luis Borges repeatedly chose to use in creating alternate universes in his fiction, both as a result of his deep engagement with the Jewish mystical tradition and as a mark of his incredulity in apprehending the Jewish condition under the crushing weight of Nazism. The three participants in our forum shed important light on this representational mode in Borges, demonstrating how it moves in his writing from clever literary strategy to acknowledgment of unfolding tragedy. In the process, they make clear why Borges must be considered not only a great author but perhaps the most Jewish of non-Jewish writers of the twentieth century.

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