



Borges and the Jews

By Ilan Stavans



Introduction

The Author

Ilan Stavans is a Mexican-American, essayist, lexicographer, cultural commentator, translator, short-story author, TV personality, and teacher known for his insights into American, Hispanic, and Jewish cultures.

Life

Ilan Stavans was born in Mexico to a middle-class Jewish family from the Pale of Settlement, his father Abraham was a popular Mexican soap opera star. Living in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, he ultimately immigrated to the United States in 1985. Upon completing his graduate education in New York City, he settled in New England where he lives with his wife, Alison, and his two sons, Joshua and Isaiah. His journey is the topic of his autobiography *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2001). He received a Master's degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary and a Doctorate in Letters from Columbia University. He was the host of the syndicated PBS show *Conversations with Ilan Stavans*, which ran from 2001 to 2006.

He is best known for his investigations on language and culture. His love for lexicography is evident in *Dictionary Days: A Defining Passion* (2005).

Stavans's work is wide-ranging, and includes both scholarly monographs such as *The Hispanic Condition* (1995) and comic strips in the case of *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* (with Lalo Alcaraz) (2000). Stavans is editor of several anthologies including *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* (1998). A selection of his work appeared in 2000 under the title *The Essential Ilan Stavans*. In 2004, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Pablo Neruda's birth, Stavans edited the 1,000-page-long *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*. The same year he edited the 3-volume set of Isaac Bashevis Singer: *Collected Stories* for the Library of America.

He has also displayed a strong interest in popular culture. Among other topics, he has written influential essays on the Mexican comedian, Mario Moreno ("Cantinflas"), the lampooner José Guadalupe Posada, the Chicano leader

César Chávez, and the Tejana singer Selena, as well as a book about the board game Lotería! (with Teresa Villegas), which includes Stavans's own poems. He was also featured in one of the Smithsonian Q&A books.

Since 1993 he has been on the faculty at Amherst College, Massachusetts, where he is the Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture. He has also taught at various other institutions, including Columbia University. In 1997, Stavans was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and has been the recipient of international prizes and honors, including the Latino Literature Prize, Chile's Presidential Medal, and the Rubén Darío Distinction.

Influence

He has portrayed Jewish-American identity as Eurocentric and parochial. He has been a critic of the nostalgia generated by life in the Eastern European shtetl of the 19th century. He is recognized for his explorations of Jewish culture in the Hispanic world. In 1994 he published the anthology *Tropical Synagogues: Stories by Jewish-Latin American Writers* (1994). From 1997 to 2005 he edited the Jewish Latin America series at the University of New Mexico Press. And his anthology *The Schocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature* (2005) was the recipient of the National Jewish Book Award. Some of his essays on Jewish topics are included in *The Inveterate Dreamer*. His work has been translated into a dozen languages.

His inspirations range from Jorge Luis Borges to Edmund Wilson and Walter Benjamin. (In his autobiography, Stavans recounts the episode, in the early stages of his career, when, in order to find his own style, he burned his collection of dozens of Borges's books, p.9.) He has written a small biography of the Chicano lawyer Oscar "Zeta" Acosta and a book-long meditation on Octavio Paz. In 2005, in a series of interviews with Neal Sokol called *Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations*, Stavans traces his beginnings, calls Hispanic civilization to task for its allergy to constructive self-criticism, discusses the work of Borges, Franz Kafka, Isaac Babel, Sholem Aleichem, Gabriel García Márquez, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Octavio Paz, Samuel Johnson, Edward Said, Miguel de Cervantes, and others, and reflects on anti-Semitism and anti-Hispanic sentiment.

Stavans has devoted many years of study to the work of Gabriel García Márquez. His biography, *Gabriel García Márquez: The Early Years*, slated for publication in 2010, is the first of two planned volumes. The biography traces Gabriel García Márquez's artistic development from childhood to the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Spanish in 1967 and its English translation by Gregory Rabassa in 1970. Julia Alvarez, author of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, has called this biography "an engaging, informative study tracking the small beginnings of a literary giant and his magnum opus. It is also a love story: that of an important contemporary critic and thinker with a writer, his life, and his text. Stavans enlightens us, not just about one literary figure, but about the culture and history of a whole hemisphere in a book that never feels plodding or overtly academic. Stavans is a magical writer himself."

In *A Critic's Journey*, published in 2009 by University of Michigan Press, Stavans writes about his life and work as a cultural critic. The book is a collection of pieces that brings together three cultures: Jewish, American, and Mexican. It includes pieces on writing *On Borrowed Words*, the Holocaust in Latin America, the growth of Latino studies in the U.S. academy, Stavans' relationship with the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and translation in the shaping of Hispanic culture, as well as pieces on Sandra Cisneros, Richard Rodríguez, Isaiah Berlin, and W. G. Sebald, asnd close readings of the *Don Quixote* and the oeuvre of Roberto Bolaño.

Since the late 1990s, Stavans has devoted his energy to reinvigorating the literary genre of the conversation not as a promotional tool but as a patient, insightful instrument to explore a them in intellectual depth. Neal Sokol interviewed Stavans in a book-long volume *Eight Conversations* (2004) on his Jewish and Latino heritage, translator Verónica Albin discussed the way the word "love" has changed through the age in the book *Love and Language* (2007) as well as on topic like libraries and censorship in *Knowledge and Censorship* (2008), and Canadian journalist Mordecai Drache (*Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture*) probes him on the Bible as a work of literature in *With All Thine Heart* (2010). In the U.S. Latino literary tradition, writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Richard Rodriguez have also practiced the conversation as a meditative form.

Fiction

Stavans's short stories are included in *The One-Handed Pianist* (1996) and *The Disappearance* (2006). One of them, "Morirse está en hebreo," about Jewish life in Mexico at the time of the 2000 presidential election, which appeared in the later anthology, was turned into a movie directed by Alejandro Springall called "My Mexican Shiva." The film was praised by Martin Tsai in the *New York Sun* ("Lifetimes To Go in Old Mexico." August 29, 2008). Mr. Tsai writes "My Mexican Shiva offers so much profundity that almost every viewer can walk out of the theater with something to mull...Mr. Springall and screenwriter Jorge Goldenberg have so skillfully infused the film with an intriguing story, convincing performances, and a breezy pace that one nearly forgets that the action unfolds almost entirely within the confines of one house. The film's coda may be somewhat anticlimactic because the confrontations do not boil over as anticipated. But, like the rest of the film, it rings utterly true."

The themes in Stavans' fiction range from redemption and revenge to cultural authenticity and political activism. In "A Heaven Without Crows," he imagines Kafka's final letter to Max Brod, suggesting that maybe he shouldn't burn his *œuvre*. "The One-Handed Pianist" deals with a rare disease affecting a piano concert player, impeding her the use of one hand. In "Xerox Man," written for the BBC, about an Orthodox Jewish thief of rare books, Stavans meditates on imperfection. And in "The Disappearance," about the kidnapping of a famous Jewish stage actor in the Low Countries, Stavans explores the perils of silence. "The Disappearance" serves as the basis of a play he created with the Double Edge Theater Company. The play's premiere was staged at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles on October 16, 2008 (see Mike Boehm's article "Seeking Haven on Earth." *Los Angeles Times* October 15, 2008).

His graphic novel "Mr. Spic Goes to Washington" (2008) was hailed by the writer Rigoberto González as "Stavans' latest contribution to a stellar career in literary troublemaking." Mr. González states in the *El Paso Times* (Texas) "Unlike "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," the Jimmy Stewart vehicle that inspires the title and premise of this book (a film that, incidentally, did not thrill Congress back in 1939 because of its depiction of a corrupt and self-

absorbed branch of government), "Mr. Spic" inhabits a grittier version of this fantasy story line: There really is no place for such a pro-Latino agitator like him in Washington. And so his political career is cut short, though Stavans assures us that the ideas, dreams and visions of a pioneer do not vanish with his martyrdom." ("What If You Voted for the Vato?" El Paso Times October 19, 2008) Elaine Ayala writes in the San Antonio Express-News "'Mr. Spic' delivers Latino history lessons with comedic bows not only to Mr. Smith but Cervantes' Don Quixote, Woody Allen's 'Zelig,' JFK conspiracy theories, even Bill Clinton...The 110-page book is a quick, entertaining read that will appeal to a wider and younger audience than has read Stavans before. Fans of 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart' and 'The Colbert Report' will enjoy its comedic value and caustic satire." ("Idealistic Mr. Spic Shocks and Provokes." San Antonio Express-News July 27, 2008).

Cultural Studies

His views on language are polemical in their approach to word and structure formation. Stavans believes that dictionaries and language academies are buffers whose improbable function is to provide continuity for a language, but suggests that such continuity, especially in the age of electronic communication, is fatuous. He accuses the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language in Madrid of colonialism, among other things. He has also studied the Iberian conquest of the Americas in the 16th century from a linguistic perspective. Translation, for Stavans, represents appropriation. He defined modernity as "a translated way of life" and has written and lectured on the role translators perform as communicating vessels across epochs and habitats.

Criticism

He has been criticized by some Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latin Americans who have attempted to discredit him for writing on Hispanic culture while being Jewish and Caucasian. Many critics in US Latino Studies, however, have criticized Stavans for appropriating the field of Latino Studies and for the many factual errors in his published output.

Publications

Complete book-length original works

- 2010 - With All Thine Heart: Love and the Bible.
- 2010 - Gabriel García Márquez: The Early Years.
- 2009 - A Critic's Journey
- 2008 - Resurrecting Hebrew.
- 2008 - Mr. Spic Goes to Washington, illustrations by Roberto Weil.
- 2008 - Knowledge and Censorship (with Verónica Albin).
- 2007 - Love and Language (with Verónica Albin).
- 2006 - The Disappearance: A Novella and Stories.
- 2005 - Dictionary Days: A Defining Passion.
- 2005 - Conversations with Ilan Stavans (with Neal Sokol).
- 2003 - Lotería!, art by Teresa Villegas, essay and riddles by Ilan Stavans.
- 2003 - Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language.
- 2001 - On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language.
- 2001 - Octavio Paz: A Meditation.
- 2001 - The Inveterate Dreamer: Essays and Conversations on Jewish Literature.
- 2000 - The Essential Ilan Stavans.
- 2000 - Latino U.S.A.: A Cartoon History, illustrations by Lalo López Alcaraz.
- 1998 - The Riddle of Cantinflas: Essays on Popular Hispanic Culture.
- 1996 - Art and Anger: Essays on Politics and the Imagination.
- 1996 - The One-Handed Pianist and Other Stories.
- 1995 - Bandido. Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta and the Chicano Experience.
- 1995 - The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America.
- 1993 - Imagining Columbus: The Literary Voyage.

Edited Works

- 2010 - The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature, edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.
- 2009 - Becoming Americans: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing, edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2008 - *Latina Writers* (The Ilan Stavans Library of Latino Civilization), edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2008 - *Spanglish* (The Ilan Stavans Library of Latino Civilization), edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2008 - *Immigration* (The Ilan Stavans Library of Latino Civilization), edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2008 - *An Organizer's Tale: Speeches*", written by César Chávez, edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2007 - *I Explain a Few Things: Selected Poems*, written by Pablo Neruda, edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2007 - *A Luis Leal Reader (Latino Voices/Vidas)*", edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2006 - *Lengua Fresca*, co-edited by Ilan Stavans and Harold Augenbraum.

2005 - *Rubén Darío: Selected Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

2005 - *Encyclopedia Latina*, edited by Ilan Stavans (four vols.).

2005 - *The Schocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

2004 - *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Collected Stories*, edited by Ilan Stavans (3 vols.).

2003 - *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

2002 - *The Scroll and the Cross: 1,000 Years of Jewish-Hispanic Literature*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

2001 - *Wachale! Poetry and Prose on Growing Up Latino*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

1999 - *Mutual Impressions: Writers of the Americas Reading One Another*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

1998 - *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

1997 - *Calvert Casey: The Collected Stories*, edited and with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

1997 - *The Urban Muse*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

1997 - *The Oxford Book of Latin American Essays*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

1996 - *Oscar "Zeta" Acosta: The Uncollected Works*, edited by Ilan Stavans.

1996 - *New World: Young Latino Writers*, edited with an introduction by Ilan Stavans.

1994 - *Tropical Synagogues. Short Stories by Jewish-Latin American Writers*,

edited by Ilan Stavans.

1993 - Growing up Latino: Memoirs and Stories, co-edited by Ilan Stavans and Harold Augenbraum.

Critical bibliography

Allatson, Paul (2006). "Ilan Stavans's Latino USA. A Cartoon History (of a cosmopolitan intellectual)." Chasqui (Magazine/Journal)

Sokol, Neal (2004). Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations

Television

Conversations with Ilan Stavans (PBS, La Plaza)

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Part I: Yo, Judio

If I am not one of Thy repetitions or errata...

-J.L.B., "The Secret Miracle"

Throughout his life, [Jorge Luis Borges](#) (1899-1986) was overwhelmed by a strange feeling of unworthiness. He was, he claimed, unworthy of friendship, love, and public attention. The more he achieved, the more puzzled he was by the towering praise that had descended on him. And he kept on waiting for the day when people would finally recognize how mistaken they had been about his genius.

Borges felt a particular affinity towards Jews in part because of the shared psychology of self-deprecation. In stories like "Unworthy" he featured Jewish protagonists struggling to find a sense of self-worth. The Jewish characters in his work in many ways stand in for Borges himself, reflecting his own complex views about his identity.

My intention in this four-part series is to reflect on Borges' vision as manifested in his life and his oeuvre, offering a detailed, even talmudic look at Borges through a catch phrase here, motif there, a plotline. I must confess, as I embark upon this journey, that Borges oeuvre has been, for me, a Jew raised in Mexico, a map of identity. Through his meditations on time, dreams, *doppelgangers*, God, I have learned what it means to be a Hispanic Jew.

Borges wasn't an aristocrat, although often he behaved like one. His past was not unillustrious: one of Borges' grandfathers, Francisco Borges Lafinur, had fought at the Battle of Caseros against the tyrant Juan Manuel de Rosas; he died in the Battle of La Verde, which was part of General Bartolomé Mitre's failed arms uprising against Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. However, Borges himself had not inherited this macho gene, confessing in his "Autobiographical Notes" (*The New York Times*, September 19, 1970) that "I spent a great deal of my boyhood indoors." He yearned, he wrote, "for that epic destiny which the gods denied me, no doubt wisely."

Rather than drawing on the line of Francisco Borges Lafinur, Borges more frequently drew upon a largely ethereal connection with the *soldados* in Argentina on his mother's side of the family. Simply put, Borges refurbished his background, making it look more distinguished than it was; or more suitable to the ethos that defines a life spent with too many books around and too little adventure. He used literature to become what he felt he was not, to become the warrior he could never be. [\[jgk1\]](#).

As Borges searched for a genealogy he could truly own, he returned again and again to the Jews. His genealogical tree doesn't show any Semitic lineage. But he longed for one. In a poem written in 1967, celebrating the triumphant Six-Day War in which Israel defended itself against its Arab enemies, he wondered if Israel, as an emblem, could be found in his genealogy. Indeed, he

faithfully searched throughout his entire life for a trace of Jewish blood in his ancestry. This is poignantly clear in a brief essay called "*Yo, judío*," "I, a Jew," whose historical value is decisive in understanding Borges' interest in things Jewish. Over the years, that interest, in its different facets, and to various degrees of success, has been explored by academics like Edna Aizenberg, Saúl Sosnowski, and Jaime Alazraki. Here is the first paragraph of "*Yo, Judío*" in Eliot Weinberger's English translation, included in [*Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fiction*](#) (1999):

Like the Druzes, like the moon, like death, like next week, the distant past is one of those things that can enrich ignorance. It is infinitely malleable and agreeable, far more obliging than the future and far less demanding of our efforts. It is the famous season favors by all mythologies.



"I, a Jew" appeared in the April 1934 issue of the Buenos Aires magazine *Megáfono*. It is among the least known essays by Jorge Luis Borges, who saw it as an orphan piece, never collecting it in *Other Inquisitions* or any of his nonfiction volumes. It has always been available in Spanish in one form or another; before Weinberger included it in his *Selected Non-Fiction*, it surfaced briefly in English in an American anthology published by E.P. Dutton called *Borges: A Reader* (1981), edited by Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Thomas Colchie. The essay continues:

*Who has not, at one point or another, played with thoughts of his ancestors, with the prehistory of his flesh and blood? I have done so many times, and many times it has not displeased me to think of myself as Jewish. It is an idle hypothesis, a frugal and sedentary adventure that harms no one, not even the name of Israel, as my Judaism is wordless, like the songs of Mendelssohn. The magazine *Crisol* [Crucible], in its issue of January 30, has decided to gratify this retrospective hope; it speaks of my "Jewish ancestry, maliciously hidden" (the participle and the adverb amaze and delight me).*

Borges reacted with enviable concentration, even stalwart conviction, to an accusation, made in 1934 by the magazine *Crisol*, that he was indeed a Jew. The accusation came from an anti-Semitic faction of the Argentine intelligentsia and had as its objective to discredit Borges in public opinion. He, in turn, took the accusation as a compliment.

At the time of the publication of "*Yo, judío*," Argentina, in what proved to be a pattern throughout the century, was ruled by the military. In 1933, *Megáfono* had devoted a full issue to Borges, who was regarded locally as what the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío once described, in general terms, as "*un raro*"—a Wildean dandy, an Europeanized auteur infatuated with metaphysics and prone to

an obtuse vocabulary. As a response to the *Megáfono* festschrift, the right-wing, nationalist periodical *Crisol*, also published in Buenos Aires, attacked Borges for hiding his "Israelite" origins. "Yo, judío," his brave and unapologetic response to *Crisol*, pointed out, in the measured prose that was to become his trademark, a deep desire to find the missing link in his ancestry—the Jew in the mirror. The essay continues:

Borges Acevedo is my name. Ramos Mejía, in a note to the fifth chapter of *Rosas and His Time*, lists the family names in Buenos Aires at that time in order to demonstrate that all, or almost all, "come from Judeo-Portuguese stock." "Acevedo" is included in the list: the only supporting evidence for my Jewish pretensions until this confirmation in *Crisol*. Nevertheless, Captain Honorario Acevedo undertook a detailed investigation that I cannot ignore. His study notes that the first Acevedo to disembark on this land was the Catalan Don Pedro de Azevedo in 1728: landholder, settler of "Pago de los Arroyos," father and grandfather of cattle ranchers in that province, a notable who figures in the annals of the parish of Santa Fe and in the documents of the history and the Viceroyalty—an ancestor, in short, irreparably Spanish.

Two hundred years and I can't find the Israelite; two hundred years and my ancestor still eludes me.

I am grateful for the stimulus provided by Crisol, but hope is dimming that I will ever be able to discover my link to the Table of the Breads and the Sea of Bronze; to Heine, Gleizer, and the ten Sefiroth; to Ecclesiastes and Chaplin.

The final section of "Yo, judío" is emphatic. In it Borges establishes, once and for all, his unquestionable loyalty. In a country like Argentina where anti-Semitism is a norm, he made a commitment to connect with the Jewish community in Buenos Aires.



Jorge Luis Borges and Baruch Tenenbaum, founder of the Wallenberg Foundation, built up a close relationship in the mid '60's. Together they fought against discrimination and promoted solidarity and understanding.

Statistically, the Hebrews were few. What would we think of someone in the year 4000 who uncovers people from San Juan province everywhere? Our inquisitors seek out Hebrews, but never Phoenicians, Garamantes, Scythians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Huns, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Ethiopians, Illyrians, Paphlagonians, Sarmatians, Medes, Ottomans, Berbers, Britons, Libyians, Cyclopes, or Lapiths. The nights of Alexandria, of Babylon, of Carthage, of Memphis, never succeeded in engendering a single grandfather; it was only to the tribes of the bituminous Dead Sea that this gift was granted.



In the context of Argentine letters, and, by extension, in intellectual circles of the Hispanic world in general, Borges' positive interest and appreciation for Jews is a *rara avis*. No other non-Jewish author from the region addresses Jewish themes with the depth and complexity of the Argentine. The question, one wonders, is why. How is it that in an area so given to ignoring *lo judío* comes along so influential and visionary a figure?

Borges learned about Jews from books, of course. While still young, he read James Joyce (whose character Leopold Bloom struck him as emblematic of "the Wandering Jew") and Franz Kafka, a writer who inspired him to such an extent that he translated Kafka into Spanish and for decades was among his first, and sole, promoters in the Spanish-speaking world. Gustav Meyrink's German novel *The Golem* also left a deep impression. The Hassidic tales compiled by Martin Buber exercised a fascination for him. At different points in his life, he even expressed interest in learning ancient Hebrew. (He eventually settled for other ancient languages, including Anglo-Saxon.)

Jews had arrived in Argentina in waves from the fifteenth century onward, starting with a wave of marranos, New Christians and crypto-Jews who came escaping the Inquisition. Arriving from Portugal, the Netherlands, Northern Africa and, of course, Spain itself, these Sephardic Jews spoke Spanish and slowly disappeared into the Argentine melting pot. The Argentinian Jews Borges knew best were from a very different past, part of the immigrant wave of Ashkenazi or Yiddish-speaking Jews who arrived roughly between 1880 and 1930, escaping the pogroms of Eastern Europe. By the time Borges came of age, it was these Ashkenazi Jews, mostly poor and uneducated, who were a fixture in Argentinean society.

Jews, for Borges, thus were Ashkenazi Jews, the Jews of Joyce and Buber, the Jews who had arrived in Buenos Aires in the nineteenth century. They were not some distant fantastical race, but a people Borges knew. He maintained close ties with a handful of urbane, forward-looking Jewish intellectuals, among them his tutor Alberto Gerchunoff, considered the grandfather of Jewish-Latin American letters with his collection of vignettes, *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, originally published in 1910. And he understood the vagaries of their fate: as a young man, Borges traveled with his family to Europe, where they were caught up by World War I.

Five years later, Borges and his family were able to return to Buenos Aires. The contrast between the Old World and the New affected him deeply. While biographers note that this trip gave Borges a new perspective on his homeland (with its national types, the *gauchos*, *compadritos*, *orilleros*), it also fed his fascination with the Jews who had left that older world, the Europe in decline.

A story by Borges emblematic of his relationship with Jews in Argentina is "Unworthy," included in *Doctor Brodie's Report* (1970). As its title suggests, the theme returns to the issue of unworthiness at the heart of Borges' oeuvre. Architecturally, it is shaped as a story within a story. The story begins with the narrator describing his friendship with a Jewish businessman, don Santiago Fischbein, the owner of the Librería Buenos Aires on Calle Talcahuano. This early section allows for insightful views on politics in Argentina:

Fischbein had tended toward the obese; his features are not as clear in my memory as our long conversations are. Firmly yet coolly he would condemn Zionism-it would make the Jew an ordinary man, he said, tied like all other men to a single tradition and a single country, and bereft of the complexities and discords that now enrich him. I recall that he once told me that a new edition of the works of Baruch Spinoza was being prepared, which would banish all that Euclidean apparatus that makes Spinoza's work so difficult to read yet at the same time imparts an illusory sense of rigor to the fantastic theory. Fischbein showed me (though he refused to sell me) a curious copy of Rosenroth's Kabbala Denudata, but my library does contain some books by Ginsburg and Waite that bear Fischbein's seal.

Fischbein himself then takes control of the narrative. He tells the narrator a defining anecdote of his past, when he was still struggling as a Jew to become Argentinean. "I don't know whether I've ever mentioned that I'm from Entre Ríos," he states. "I won't tell you that we were Jewish gauchos-there were never any Jewish gauchos. We were merchants and small farmers." In a single, decisive stroke, Borges demystifies the tradition of Jewish gauchos eulogized by Alberto Gerchunoff and others. Kindling a debate that continues to this day, he suggests that the early chapter of the Ashkenazi immigration to Argentina, turned through nostalgia into a usable bucolic past, is fiction.

The sociological component in this story becomes even more tangible, as does the debate on identity. How have Argentine Jews solved their dilemma of belonging? How do they understand the concept of homeland? Fischbein's parents moved their family to Buenos Aires, where they opened a store. They lived in a neighborhood where there were street-corner gangs. The anecdote Fischbein tells is of his friendship with one of them, a *compadrito* whom he perceived as a hero: Francisco Ferrari. "He had black hair and was rather tall, good-looking-handsome in the style of those days. He always wore black." At one point, a gang harrasses Fischbein and Ferrari rescues him. Fischbein idealizes him and Ferrari invites him to his clan. It happens, again, just as Fischbein is struggling to find his Jewish-Argentine identity. "I don't know how to explain it to you," Fischbein tells the narrator:

Today I've carved out a place for myself. I have this bookstore that I enjoy and whose books I read; I have friendships, like ours; I have my wife and children; I've joined the Socialist party-I'm a good Argentine and a good Jew. I am respected and respectable. The man you see now is almost bald; at

the time I was a poor Jewish kid with red hair in a tough neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. People looked askance at me. I tried, as all young fellows do, to be like everyone else. I had started calling myself Santiago to make the Jacob go away, but there was nothing I could do about the Fischbein. We all come to resemble the image others have of us: I sensed people's contempt for me, and I felt contempt for myself as well. At that time, and especially in that setting, it was important to be brave; I knew myself to be a coward. Women intimidated me; deep down, I was ashamed of my fainthearted chastity. I had no friends my own age.

At that precise moment, Ferrari invites Fischbein to be part of a robbery. He includes him in the planning stages and gives him a specific role. Fischbein's self-esteem improves temporarily:



Borges giving a lecture at Casa Argentina in Israel

Friendship, you know, is as mysterious as love or any other state of this confusion we call life. In fact, I have sometimes suspected that the only thing that holds no mystery is happiness, because it is its own justification. However that may be, the fact was that Francisco Ferrari, the daring, strong Ferrari, felt a sense of friendship for me, contemptible me. I felt he was mistaken, that I was not worthy of that friendship. I tried to avoid him, but he wouldn't let me. My anxiety was made worse by my mother's disapproval; she could not resign herself to my associating with what she called "the riffraff," nor to the fact that I'd begun to ape them.

True to his unworthiness, Fischbein becomes an informer—a Jewish informer. Shortly before the robbery, he goes to the police station and lets the authorities—the hated authorities—in on the details of the plot. One of the officers asks him: "Are you making the accusations because you think you're a good citizen? Is that it?" The response is symptomatic: "I didn't feel he'd understand, so I answered. 'Yes, sir. I'm a good Argentine!'"

As expected, in the middle of the robbery the police appear. Fischbein hears four shots. Ferrari's body and that of one of his accomplices are dragged out of the building. They had been shot at point-blank range. Fischbein adds: "In their report the police said the robbers had failed to halt when they were ordered, and that Ferrari and don Eliseo had fired the first shots. I knew that was a lie, because I had never seen either of them with a revolver. The police had taken advantage of the occasion to settle an old score."

Fischbein's story is not a simple one. The Jewish-Argentinian world Borges creates overturns the stereotype of the Jew as guacho. Instead, Jews are everything else: lawyers, doctors, thieves, prostitutes. "Unworthy" is a story of guilt and betrayal. A pseudo-Jewish Gaucho enters the world of gangs and hopes to become a *compadrito*. But in the end he is incapable of establishing his bonds to that world and joins ranks with the wrong side: the police. Borges frames the narrative

from the perspective of Jewish belonging. Are Jews Argentines? Superficially they are, sometimes in spite of themselves. But as perennial outsiders, they will never truly penetrate the Argentine psyche. In other words, they might be Argentines in paper, but they'll never be *compadritos*.

That Borges depicts Jews as outsiders and not *compadritos*, insiders, is not at all meant on his part as a slight against either Jews or *compadritos*. Borges was envious of *compadritos*. They were courageous. They were brave. Yet, he, Borges, an Argentinian, did not identify with *compadritos*—could not identify with them. The novelist could only understand his countrymen by scrutinizing them as an outsider. Fischbein, then, is being placed in the same subject position as Borges himself: an interloper, a falsifier, more connected with books than with life itself.

I've dreamed of one day putting together a volume of Borgeana about Jews. It would include "Unworthy" as well as a myriad essays and poems I intend to mention in this series. Of course, at the center of it would be my own favorite Borges stories, including "*Deutches Requiem*" and "Emma Zunz," the two dealing with Ashkenazi Jews. "Emma Zunz," included in *The Aleph* (1949), might well be his best, although it is also among his strangest, for no other reason than the fact Borges seldom features a female protagonist in his oeuvre, let alone a rebellious one, taking the law in her own hands, as this one does. I wrote about it years ago from the perspective of Jewish theodicy: in "Emma Zunz," we have a character who defies social rules and competes with the divine.

The story takes place in early 1922, as the female protagonist, Emma Zunz, receives a letter from Brazil announcing the death of her father, Manuel Meier, also known as Emanuel Zunz. Although she is told he died of an accidental overdose of Veronal (that is, a suicide), she knows better. She recalls a scandal in his business and the fact that her father's partner, Aaron Loewenthal, drove him to his end. Borges devotes himself to exploring Emma's inner emotions and her determination to take revenge. Indeed, this is a story of an individual taking the law into her own hands. Emma recognizes that, since the facts about Loewenthal aren't known, human law is unlikely to put him on trail. Her option, then, is to devise a stratagem in order to make Loewenthal pay for his crime but in such a way so as Emma is not deemed a criminal. "She did not sleep that night, and by the time first light defined the rectangle of the window, she had perfected her plan. In the mill, there were rumors of a strike; Emma declared, as she always did, that she was opposed to all forms of violence."

What is Emma's plan? She's still a virgin. She decides to go to the pier and have herself deflowered by an anonymous Scandinavian sailor. She then goes to Aaron Loewenthal's office above the mill when he's alone. She pretends to be sexually abused by him and then kills him with a revolver. The actual scene of revenge is described in a complex manner. Here is how Andrew Hurley ([Collected Fictions](#), 1998) translates it :

Sitting before Aaron Loewenthal, Emma felt (more than the urgency to avenge her father) the

urgency to punish the outrage she herself had suffered. She could not not kill him, after being so fully and thoroughly dishonored. Nor did she have time to waste in theatrics. Sitting timidly in his office, she begged Loewenthal's pardon, invoked (in her guise as snitch) the obligations entailed by loyalty, mentioned a few names, insinuated others, and stopped short, as through overcome by fearfulness. Her performance succeeded; Loewenthal went out to get her a glass of water. By the time he returned from the dining hall, incredulous at the woman's fluttering perturbation yet full of solicitude, Emma had found the heavy revolver in the drawer. She pulled the trigger twice. Loewenthal's considerable body crumpled as though crushed by the explosions and the smoke; the glass of water shattered; his face looked at her with astonishment and fury; the mouth in the face cursed her in Spanish and Yiddish.

Borges' scene is strikingly cinematic. He focuses on the gun, then on the victim. He then allows Emma a few dramatic words: "I have avenged my father, and I shall not be punished..." "Emma Zunz" concludes in a philosophical tone:

Then she picked up the telephone and repeated what she was to repeat so many times, in those and other words: Something has happened, something unbelievable... Sr. Loewenthal sent for me on the pretext of the strike... He raped me... I killed him...

The story was unbelievable, yes-and yet it convinced everyone, because in substance it was true. Emma Zunz's tone of voice was real, her shame was real, her hatred was real. The outrage that had been done to her was real, as well; all that was false were the circumstances, the time, and one or two proper names.

Why does Borges set the plot amidst Yiddish-speaking immigrants? As a result of his financial dealings, her father has been forced to run to southern Brazil, specifically to the Rio Grande do Sul province. He has also changed his identity by adopting another name. Her father's memory brings her back to her childhood in the province of Entre Ríos. But she lives in Calle Liniers, in Lanús, a middle-class neighborhood in southwestern Buenos Aires. Aaron Loewenthal's mill is on Warnes Street, in central Buenos Aires, near the Villa Crespo commercial district.

Do the names of these immigrants signal a connection to the world of the *shtetl*? Emma is the daughter of a newcomer, an Argentine by birth. Thus, she is a full citizen. But she still acts like an outsider. Rather than trusting the judicial system, she resorts to implementing her own punishment against her father's victimizer. Some critics approach the text from a psychoanalytic perspective: Emma and her father are united by a natural pact, which she sanctifies when an outsider distresses their liaison.

Other scholars have struggled to understand the story from an esoteric perspective. After all, the protagonist's names each have just four letters, the same as the Tetragrammaton, the divine name. The palindromic quality of the name, the two "ms" in Emma, the two "z"s in Zunz, emphasize a numerological approach. And so some scholars approach Emma Zunz from a kabbalistic perspective, seeing Emma as a figure of the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of God.

Aizenberg states in *The Aleph Weaver*:

Emma, her wronged and exiled father, and the embezzler, Aaron Loewenthal, reenact the mystical story of God's Daughter-the feminine hypostasis of the divine-who is separated from her heavenly progenitor and falls into an unclean physical-sexual world as a result of sin. Since the Daughter is God the Father's power of stern judgment, she proceeds to punish the wrong-doer through destruction and violence, without, however, restoring the harmony which existed in the happy days before the sin.

I believe that Borges, who was still in his forties when he crafted "Emma Zunz" (it originally appeared in the magazine *Sur* 167, September 1948), made Emma's odyssey far more mundane. In an interview, for example, Borges discounts any attempt to find symbolism in Emma's name, averring: "I was trying to get an ugly and at the same time a colorless name... [T]he name seems so meaningless, so insignificant." The plot was given to him by his friend Cecilia Ingenieros. Borges in turn dedicated the story to her, saying "I was not so much dedicating it to her as giving it to her back."

Yet, it is Borges who refines the plot, making this a story of Argentine-born, educated Yiddish speakers, cosmopolitan Jews, upper class snobs who are at home neither among the "Tevyes and Yentls" of the immigrant Jewish world nor among Fischbein's *compadritos*. Emma is not a believer, though that in itself only serves to underscore the rebellious spirit Borges tends to identify as particularly Jewish. Her decision to act on behalf of her sense of justice, despite the social mores of her culture, places her in the tradition of biblical characters: if society isn't ready to hand in a sentence, she is ready to do it herself. Borges' idea of Jewishness emphasizes individual responsibility above social conventions. Emma's decision to give up her virginity so as to avenge her father is a sign that the higher order is more important than integrity. She is ready to sacrifice herself for an abstract idea of justice.

"Emma Zunz," finally, is, like "Unworthy," about stereotypes. Manuel Meier and Aaron Loewenthal are businessmen. Money is on their mind. Money becomes a source of dispute. They speak Yiddish. One kills the other. This is the pecuniary world of Shakespeare's Shylock. But just as Fischbein uproots the stereotype of the Jewish gaucho, Emma's action unsettles the stereotype of the money-grubbing Jew: she sacrifices herself in order to achieve a superior form of justice.

Indeed, rather than (or along with) seeing her name as a symbol of the divine, one might just as easily see the name Emma as a tribute to Emma Bovary and Emma Woodhouse, strong-willed women in the Western canon who refuse to conform to the male establishment.

For Borges, Jewishness is not only about being unworthy, about suffering, but about turning

suffering into vision. The essential quality of the Jew is the ability, like Emma Zunz, of turning disgrace into justice, the mundane into the divine.

Emma's premediated transfiguration reminds me of an essay by Borges on blindness-his own. Borges, since early childhood, knew he would one day become blind. It was congenital in his illness. His father, among other relatives, was also blind. And blindness struck librarians in Argentina who, like him, were directors of the National library, Paul José Marmol and Groussac. In the last lecture of seven he gave in 1977 (later published as *Seven Nights*) Borges addressed oncoming blindness directly (in Eliot Weinberger's translation):

People generally imagine the blind as enclosed in a black world. There is, for example, Shakespeare's line: "Looking into darkness which the blind don't see." If we understand "darkness" as "blackness," then Shakespeare is wrong.

The world the blind live in, Borges suggests, is inconvenient, but not more so than any other inconvenience that affects those people able to see. And herein his message: misfortune as a way to appreciate life. This appreciation comes from his love for Jews, who have turned suffering into vision:

A writer lives. The task of being a poet is not completed at a fixed schedule. No one is a poet from eight to twelve and from two to six. Whoever is a poet is always one, and continually assaulted by poetry. I suppose a painter feels that colors and shapes are besieging him. Or a musician feels the strange world of sounds-the strangest world of art-is always seeking him out, that there are melodies and dissonances looking for him. For the task of an artist, blindness is not a total misfortune. It may be an instrument. Fray Luis de León dedicated one of his most beautiful odes to Francisco Salinas, a blind musician.

A writer, or any man, must believe that whatever happens to him is an instrument; everything has been given for an end. This is even stronger in the case of the artist. Everything that happens, including humiliations, embarrassments, misfortunes, all has been given like clay, like material for one's art. One must accept it.

A lesson, perhaps, Borges learned from his love of the Jews.

Borges and the Jews

By Ilan Stavans



Part II:

The Varieties of Jewish Mysticism

I feel a contentment in defeat.
-J.L.B., "Deutches Requiem"

I said that Borges was a *rara avis*. The intelligentsia in Latin America, particularly the left-leaning one, has never been particularly interested in things Jewish. (It isn't overtly anti-Semitic either, although since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that intelligentsia has become openly anti-Zionist.)

It's true that Carlos Fuentes has taken up topics in which Judaism is more than tangential, writing on the Nazis in *A Change of Skin*, on the Arab-Israeli conflict in *The Hydra Head*, and on Jews living in the Iberian Peninsula prior to 1492 in *Terra Nostra*. Mario Vargas Llosa, likewise, in *The Storyteller*, featured a Jewish anthropologist in Lima who becomes a griot among the Machiguenga tribe in the Amazon. More often than not, however, Jews and their contribution to Western Civilization are ignored. Typical is the magisterial oeuvre of Octavio Paz, the Nobel Prize winner in 1982, who addressed every single imaginable topic in the world of arts and letters but never addressed Jews, Judaism or Jewishness. Paz wrote on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, corruption, art and architecture, the Gulags, the Mexican inferiority complex, and so much more, yet not a single poem of his deals with the Jews in general, let alone those in the Hispanic world. Likewise with Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez.

Unlike Paz, Marquez, and most of his peers, Borges made Jews and Judaism [central to his sense of self](#). Yet, Borges was not interested in Jews as flesh-and-bones people, overwhelmed with ideological interests, religious fervor, and personal passions, but as abstractions. He was attracted to Jews as metaphors.

I do not mean to imply in the least that Borges did not know Jews himself, or socialize with them. While in Geneva and Spain during World War I, he befriended a number of Jews of Polish-Jewish origin, among them Maurice Abramowicz (about whom he wrote a poem in 1984) and as Simón Jichlinski. They were "my two bosom friends," Borges wrote in the autobiographical pieces published in *The New Yorker*. "One became a lawyer and the other a physician. I taught them to play *truco*, and they learned so well and fast that at the end of our first game they left me without a cent." He also became close to Rafael Cansinos-Assens, a Sephardic author responsible for *El candelabro de los siete brazos*. But what attracted Borges the writer was the Jew as symbol.

Self-Anointed Kabbalist

Sephirot Borges' Jewish obsession starts with the [Zohar](#), the canonical text in Kabbalah. His knowledge about Kabbalah came from secondary sources, such as *Jewish Magic and Superstition* by Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Holy Kabbalah* by Arthur E. Waite, and *Le Kabbale* by Henri Sérouya, as well as texts by Adolphe Franck and Knorr von Rosenroth, and the entry on the subject in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Borges liked the concept of Sephirot, the ten emanations of God; the method of Gematria, a kind of Jewish numerology; and the idea, expounded by Jewish mystics, that language antecedes the creation of the world.



While on a trip to Israel to receive the Jerusalem Prize, Borges was asked what he wanted to see. "Don't ask me what I want to see because I am blind," he responded. "But if you ask me whom I want to see, I'll answer, right away, [Gershom] Scholem. I spent a beautiful afternoon in his house. We met a couple of times. A charming person. He speaks perfect English." Shortly after, Borges wrote a poem about the Golem, the mythical Frankenstein of Ashkenazi Judaism, animated by a single word of its human creator.

The word "Golem" in Spanish is impossible to rhyme-unless, of course, it is matched with Scholem. Herein the first three stanzas in the translation of Alan S. Trueblood, included in Alexander Coleman's [Selected Poems](#) (1999):

If, as the Greek maintains in the *Cratylus*,
A name is the archetype of a thing,
The rose is in the letters that spell rose
And the Nile entire resounds in its name's ring.

So, composed of consonants and vowels,
There must exist one awe-inspiring word
That God inheres in-that, when spoken, holds
Almightiness in syllables unslurred.

Adam knew it in the Garden, so did the stars.
The rusty work of sin, so the cabbalists say,
Obliterated it completely;
No generation has found it to this day.

Borges places the myth of the Golem in the kabbalistic tradition. He's interested in the power of the Hebrew language, which, according to legend, was created by God even before the universe came into being. The Argentine extends this kabbalistic infusion of words with religious magic by adding his linguistic attention to the Saussurian relationship between object and word. But Borges can't remain serious-in a winking aside to any of us readers who may have missed this deep reading of the Golem as a sign of the power of language, Borges clarifies by linking this medieval monster to the great modern master of Kabbalah:

That cabbalist who played at being God
Gave his spacey offspring the nickname Golem.
(In a learned passage of his volume,
these truths have been conveyed to us by Scholem.)

Borges had discovered Kabbalah at an early age. In a [conversation with Jaime Alazraki](#), which took place at Buenos Aires' National Library, Borges suggested his interest in Jewish mysticism was sparked by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and by his adolescent readings of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

I found it in Longfellow's translation of the Divine Comedy which he undertook during the Civil War to avoid thinking about the war he was too preoccupied with. There is a three-page appendix in that translation that Longfellow took from a book-I believe it was Rabbinical Literature-by J.P. Stehelin where there is a discussion of the Hebrew alphabet and of the different meanings and values that the Kabbalists attributed to those letters. And the other reference must have come from the Britannica. As a youngster, I used to come here, to the Library, quite frequently, and since I was very shy and didn't dare ask the librarian for books, I would take a volume of the Britannica, any volume, from the shelf myself.

It was not just the American writer, though, who provoked Borges' curiosity about Kabbalah. Years later, he found Jewish esoterica in, of all places, a German text as well:

The first book I read in German, when I was studying German by myself, around 1916, was Meyrink's novel, Der Golem. I was sent on the study of German by my reading of Carlyle whom I

greatly admired. (Now I find his style more intimidating than persuasive.) I started by the same foolish thing many people do, by trying to read Kant's Critique of Pure Reason in German, a book not even Germans understand, and which very few people comprehend. Then a friend of mine- what was her name?-she was a baroness from Prague, wait, oh yes, Baroness Forschtübber, she told me that a very interesting book had just been published, a fantastic novel entitled Der Golem. I had never heard that word before. That was the first work in German I read through-the first book in prose, since I had earlier read Heine's Lyrisches Intermezzo.

Many others had read Longfellow and even Der Golem without becoming caught up in Kabbalah. For Borges, part of the attraction was that Kabbalah was Jewish. As he notes in the [same interview](#), "all things Jewish have always fascinated me." There was even more, however, a personal note: Borges suggests that some of his interest in Kabbalah came from a desire to have some connection to religion even though he could not bring himself to believe in a "personal God."

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. Later on, I have found the same, well, in Spinoza, and in pantheism in general, and also in Schopenhauer, and in Samuel Butler, and in Bernard Shaw's idea of "Life's force," and Bergson's "élan vital." All that responded to the same attraction.

Borges' first piece on the Kabbalah is called "Una vindicación de la cabala" ("A defense of the Kabbalah"). It was first published in [Discusión](#) (1932). Though Borges had thought of himself as a writer for over a decade, his style at the time was still unformed.

Neither the first time it has been attempted, nor the last time it will fail, this defense is distinguished by two facts. One is my almost complete ignorance of the Hebrew language; the other, my desire to defend not the doctrine but rather the hermeneutical or cryptographic procedures that lead to it. These procedures, as is well known, include the vertical reading of sacred texts, the reading referred to as boustrophedon (one line from left to right, the following line from right to left), the methodical substitution of certain letters of the alphabet for others, the sum of the numerical value of the letters, etc. To ridicule such operations is simple; I prefer to attempt to understand them.

He talks about the Kabbalah itself indirectly. His mission is to discuss the divine nature of the Holy Scriptures as understood by Christians and Muslims. He isn't interested in religion but in the fact that "the Spirit" creates the universe, e.g., turns Himself into a Creator, an exciting prospect for a writer, a creator in words:

Let us imagine now this astral intelligence, dedicated to manifesting itself not in dynasties or annihilations or birds, but in written words. Let us also imagine, according to the pre-Agustinian theory of verbal inspiration, that God dictates, word by word, what he proposes to say. This premise (which was the one postulated by the Kabbalists) turns the Scriptures into an absolute text, where the collaboration of chance is calculated at zero. The conception alone of such a document is a greater wonder than those recorded in its pages. A book impervious to contingencies, a mechanism of infinite purposes, of infallible variations, of revelations lying in wait, of superimpositions of light... How could one not only study it to absurdity, to numerical excess, as did the Kabbalah?

Mystical Motifs



Throughout his life, Borges used a number of kabbalistic motifs, sometimes overtly, others in a tangential, even subliminal fashion. "The Circular Ruins," for instance, might be read as a tribute to the myth of the Golem. In the story, a magician who has never had a child decides to dream his own son. Night after night he shapes his successor, until the creation acquires its own life. Then there is "The Aleph," arguably Borges' most emblematic-and famous-tale. While the primary leitmotif in this story is the Divine Comedy, played out by Borges, his deceased love Beatriz, and his rival, Dante Argentino Daneri, the elusive item at the end of the men's descent is the

magical "Aleph," clearly a reference to the Kabbalist's reverence for God's beginnings and the universe's mystic one-ness.

Kabbalistic themes also appear in Borges' poetry. In a sonnet about Spinoza, collected in *The Self and the Other*. (1964) and [translated by Willis Barnstone](#), Borges imagines the philosopher polishing a crystal lens which gives him access to "the infinite/Map of the One who now is all His stars." Likewise, in the second Spinoza sonnet, titled "Baruch Spinoza" and collected in *The Iron Coin* (1976) again translated by Barnstone, Spinoza is figured as a kabbalist, summoning God from words:

The magician moved
Carves out of his God with fine geometry;
From his disease, from nothing, he's begun
To construct God, using the word. No one
Is granted such prodigious love as he:
The love that has no hope of being loved.

The persistence of the kabbalistic imagery can be traced in the story "Death and the Compass," where the Hebrew alphabet serves as both literal and figurative map. It was published in the magazine *Sur* in 1942 and later gathered in *Artifices* (1944). It became part of [Ficciones](#) (also 1944). In his forward to *Artifices*, translated by Andrew Hurley in [Collected Fictions](#), Borges writes:

Two of [the stories], perhaps, merit some comment: "Death and the Compass" and "Funes, His Memory." The second is a long metaphor for insomnia. The first, in spite of the Germanic or Scandinavian names in it, takes place in a Buenos Aires of dreams: the twisting "rue de Toulon" is the Paseo de Julio; "Triste-le-Roy" is the hotel where Herbert Ashe received, yet probably did not read, the eleventh volume of an imaginary encyclopedia. After this fiction was written, I thought it might be worthwhile to expand the time and space the story covers: the revenge might be bequeathed to others, the periods of time might be calculated in years, perhaps in centuries; the first letter of the Name might be uttered in Iceland, the second in Mexico, the third in Hindustan. Is there any need for me to say that there are saints among the Hasidim, and that the sacrifice of four lives in order to obtain the four letters that the Name demands is a fantasy dictated by the shape of my story?

Death and the Compass: From the film by Alexander Cox Inspired by Spinoza, "Death and the

Compass" takes place in a European city much like Amsterdam. The genre is the detective story, but here, with a geometrical plan. The detective is Erik Lönnrot and his nemesis is Red Scharlach. (Notice the redness of the names.) Lönnrot is invited to exercise his intelligence by sorting out a series of four murders, each committed within symmetrical coordinates of time and space (December 3rd, January 3rd, February 3rd, etc., in northern part of the city, the western part, etc.). The victims are all Jews: Dr. Marcelo Yarmolinsky, Daniel Simón Azevedo (the last name is Borges', too), Ginzberg or Ginsburg, etc. He comes across a book by one Lausden called *Philologus hebræogræcus* (1739). The victims are at times Hasidim—one of them has an octavo volume about the teachings of Israel Baal Shem Tov-, or simply others taxi drivers. Lönnrot gets information from a journalist of the *Yiddische Zeitung* about the Tetragrammaton, the four-lettered divine name: YHWH. After each murder, a sign appears: "*The first letter of the Name has been written.*"

Red Scharlach, also known as Scharlach the Dandy, was a criminal who "had sworn upon his honor to kill Lönnrot, but Lönnrot never allowed himself to be intimidated. He thought of himself as a reasoning machine, an Auguste Dupin, but there was something of the adventurer in him, even something of the gambler." Eventually Lönnrot realizes a fourth murder is to take place in a precise time and place: March 3rd, at the abandoned Villa Triste-le-Roy. He has suspected that maybe Red Scharlach might be the last victim but then dismisses the idea. When he arrives, he sees Scharlach. Lönnrot asks: "Scharlach—you are looking for the secret name?" Hurley's translation:

Scharlach stood there, impassive. He had not participated in the brief struggle, and now moved only to put out his hand for Lönnrot's revolver. But then he spoke, and Lönnrot heard in his voice a tired triumphance, a hatred as large as the universe, a sadness no smaller than that hatred.

"No," he said. "I am looking for something more fleeting and more perishable than that—I am looking for Erik Lönnrot."

Scharlach explains how he carefully executed each and every one of his crimes. Lönnrot realizes he's about to die. He considers the three symmetrical crimes:

"There are three lines too many in your labyrinth," he said at last. "I know of a Greek labyrinth that is but one straight line. So many philosophers have been lost upon that line that a mere detective might be pardoned if he became lost as well. When you hunt me down in another avatar of our lives, Scharlach, I suggest that you fake (or commit) one crime at A, a second crime at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B and halfway between them. Then wait for me at D, two kilometers from A and C, once again halfway between them. Kill me at D, as you are about to kill me at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," Scharlach replied, "I promise you the labyrinth that consists of a single straight line that is invisible and endless."

He stepped back a few steps. Then, very carefully, he fired.

The ending is intriguing: is the Greek line more desirable than the impenetrability of the kabbalistic quadrants? Or do they both, for Borges, ultimately lead to the "invisible and endless," the unutterable mystery of life and death?

Borges and the Jews

By Ilan Stavans



Part III:

Precursors: Kafka, Babel and Agnon

**"Each writer creates his precursors"
-J.L.B.,**

Borges was the first, and for a while the only, supporter of Kafka in the Hispanic world. In an essay called "Kafka and His Precursors," published in 1951 and included in *Other Inquisitions* (1952), Borges writes in Eliot Einberger's rendition:

At one time I considered writing a study of Kafka's precursors. I had thought, at first, that he was as unique as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after spending a little time with him, I felt I could recognize his voice, or his habits, in the texts of various literatures and various ages.

Rather than offer a hermeneutic interpretation of Kafka, the essay then concentrates on a catalogue of echoes in Kafka's work: Zeno's paradox against motion, a fable by the nineteenth-century Chinese author Han Yu, Kierkegaard, the anti-Semite Léon Bloy, and Lord Dunsany. Borges concludes:

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is what is most significant. Kafka's idiosyncrasy is present in each of those writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist. The poem "Fears and Scruples" by Robert Browning prophesizes the work of Kafka, but our reading of Kafka noticeably refines and diverts our reading of the poem. Browning did not read it as we read it now. The word "precursor" is indispensable to the vocabulary of criticism, but one must try to purify it from any connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as well as it will modify the future. In this correlation, the identity or plurality of men doesn't matter. The first Kafka of "Betrachtung" is less a precursor of the Kafka of the gloomy myths and terrifying institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany.

Without a doubt, Borges works to create Kafka as his own precursor: In 1943, Borges introduced, for Editorial Losada in Buenos Aires, Kafka's *La metamorfosis*. A few years earlier he talked about him (and about Max Brod) in *El Hogar* (July 8th, 1938). Borges also included material by Kafka in his *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1940), co-edited with Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo, as well as in his compendia *Libro del cielo y el infierno* (1960, also with Bioy Casares), *Libro de los seres imaginarios* (1967), and *Libro de los sueños* (1976). A third and four pieces by Borges on Kafka were in the form of introductions. The third was the fourth title of *A Personal Library*, Borges' last editorial project, published between 1985 and 1986 in Argentina and Spain by Emecé and in Italian by Franco Marco Ricci. His selection included *Amerika* and some short stories. The fourth piece is a prologue he wrote toward the end of his life, as part of a project called *The Library of Babel* paid by the publisher Ediciones Siruela in Spain from 1978 to 1986.

Why Kafka? First, Borges needed to see literature globally. He doesn't even mention his Czech origins and his German-language style. What matters to him are the reverberations of Kafka's motifs. Yet, the particular reverberation of Kafka that most interests Borges is, again, the Jewish connection. While he does not approach Kafka in the context of Jewish literature exclusively, Borges is more interested in the Kafka of the Hassidic parables than

the novelist of *The Castle*. His prologue to Kafka's tale, *The Vulture*, offers fresh views on Borges' opinion not only on the author but on Jews in general.:

Everyone knows that Kafka always felt mysteriously guilty toward his father, in the manner of Israel with its God; his Judaism, which separated him from the rest of mankind, affected him in a complex way. The consciousness of approaching death and the feverish exaltation of tuberculosis must have sharpened those faculties...

Two ideas-or more exactly, two obsessions-rule Kafka's work: subordination and the infinite. In almost all his fictions there are hierarchies, and those hierarchies are infinite...

A less overt tribute to Kafka than these essays, yet one that is equally significant, appears in the story "The Secret Miracle." Like "*Deutches Requiem*," this short story has a single, unifying argument: the last hours of a prisoner about to be executed by the Nazis; and the two focus on a single concept: self-redemption. The former has a Jew as its protagonist, but it is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator; the latter, instead, has a Nazi as its main character, and it is he who delivers the tale to us.

I will discuss "*Deutches Requiem*" in the next section: here, I want to focus on "The Secret Miracle," which owes much more to Kafka. "The Secret Miracle," was written during World War II and collected in *Ficciones* as a triptych with Borges' other Jewish tales: "Emma Zunz" and "Death and the Compass." (I included the three in the anthology *Tropical Synagogues* [1994]). It is more than a subliminal tribute to one Kafka, dead by then for approximately a couple of decades.

The story opens with an epigraph from the *Qur'an*, 2:261: "And God caused him to die for an hundred years, and then raised him to life. And God said, 'How long hast thou waited?' He said, 'I have waited a day or part of a day'." Borges sets the plot in Prague in 1943. In the first scene Jaromir Hladik, a translator and playwright arrested by the Nazis for being Jewish, is taken to prison. The first scene is emblematic, and highly Kafkaesque: it describes a dream Hladik has of a long chess game in which the opponents have been at each other for such a long time that they have forgotten what prize was to be. Even the rules of the game have been forgotten. Clearly, Borges is setting the stage for a rivalry between Jews and Nazis as ancient as the world itself.

It is in his cell where Hladik communicates with God, and this communication is the centripetal force in the argument. Hladik, we find out, is the author an unfinished drama called *The Enemies* and he knows that, if his life is to have any meaning, it is because of his authorship of this drama. So he requests that God grant him a miracle-a secret miracle, since only he and he alone will know about it. In the final scene, as Hladik faces a German firing squad, the universe comes to a stop:

The guns converged on Hladik, but the men who were to kill him stood motionless. The sergeant's arm eternized an unfinished gesture. On a paving stone of the courtyard a bee cast an unchanging shadow. The wind had ceased, as in a picture... He had asked God for a whole year to finish his work; His omnipotence had granted it. God had worked a secret miracle for him; German lead would kill him at the set hour, but in his mind a year would go by between the order and its execution.

In the very last line of the story, Hladik is shot to death on March 29th, at 9:02 A.M. Even though no evidence of a finished manuscript of *The Enemies* can be found, the prisoner dies satisfied: his life has been justified. His justification, obviously, has to do with immortality, a theme, again, parallel to Kafka's. Borges' statement is clear: a writer's *raison d'être* is to leave behind the better part of his talent, and to struggle so that that contribution is finished, even if only "ideally." It is clear, to me at least, that in the face of tyranny and death, the Argentine understood what Jews in Europe were about: faith, endurance, and posterity.

Isaac Babel

Borges' interest in European Jews and in particular, the Hasidim, led him to a tangential interest in Isaac Babel, another Jewish author with few echoes in the Spanish-speaking world. In a "capsule biography" about him published in 1938 in the magazine *El Hogar*, to which Borges contributed between 1936 and 1939, he portrays Babel, who was still alive at the time, as a defiant Jew. Herein Esther Allen's translation:

He was born in the jumbled catacombs of the stair-stepped port of Odessa, late in 1894. Irreparably Semitic, Isaac was the son of a rag merchant from Kiev and a Moldavian Jewess. Catastrophe has been the normal climate of his life. In the uneasy intervals between pogroms he learned not only to read and write but to appreciate literature and enjoy the work of Maupassant, Flaubert, and Rabelais. In 1914, he was certified a lawyer by the faculty of Law in Saratov; in 1916, he risked a journey to Petrograd.

*In that capital city "traitors, malcontents, whiners, and Jews" were banned: the category was somewhat arbitrary, but-implacably-it included Babel. He had to rely on the friendship of a waiter who took him home and hid him, on a Lithuanian accent acquired in Sebastopol, and on an apocryphal passport. His first writings date from that period: two or three satires of the Czarist bureaucracy, published in *Annals*, Gorky's famous newspaper. (What must he think, and not say, about Soviet Russia, that indecipherable labyrinth of state offices?) Those two or three satires attracted the dangerous attention of the government. He was accused of pornography and incitement of class hatred. From this catastrophe he was saved by another catastrophe: the Russian Revolution.*

In early 1921, Babel joined a Cossack regiment. Those blustering and useless warriors (no one in the history of the universe has been defeated more often than the Cossacks) were, of course, anti-Semitic. The mere idea of a Jew on horseback struck them as laughable, and the fact that Babel was a good horseman only added to their disdain and spite. A couple of well-timed and flashy exploits enabled Babel to make them leave him in peace.

*By reputation, though not according to the bibliographies, Isaac Babel is still a *homo unius libri*. His unmatched book is titled *Red Cavalry*.*

The music of its style contrasts with the almost ineffable brutality of certain scenes. One of the stories-"Salt"-enjoys a glory seemingly reserved for poems, and rarely attained by prose: many people know it by heart.

Years ago I introduced Babel's stories into a Spanish-speaking audience. (An English version of the introduction to *Cuentos de Odesa and Cuentos de Odesa* [1993] appears in my book *The Inveterate Dreamer* [2001].) Borges' profile is a revelation because no two writers could be more different. Indeed, they are like oil and water: the Russian, while a meticulous stylist á la Maupassant, focused on the physical (e.g., the Jewish body) and on political and social tensions in the early Soviet Union; the Argentine, instead, was an escapist concerned with the metaphysical. Borges' understanding of Babel, obviously, comes through secondary sources, as did much of his knowledge in general. Still, even if he had read his stories, and I'm skeptical about it, the connection between them would have remained tenuous.

Agnon

A stronger, and more vital influence on Borges came from a different direction, Israel, but through the same chain of association: the Hasidic world of Eastern Europe. Agnon (*aka* Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes), was an Israeli writer, but among his earliest works was a translation of the *Tales of the Ba'al Shem Tov*. Whether Borges found Agnon through these tales, or through another means, by the mid-sixties Borges was sufficiently enamoured of Agnon's writing to devote a series of lectures to him.

Delivered at the Instituto Cultural Argentino-Israelí in Buenos Aires, two of these lectures, one on the *Book of Job*, the other on Spinoza, were eventually translated into English. It turns out that there was a third lecture as well. A chance comment with Neal Sokol-included in *Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations* (2004)-in which I state that Borges never read Shmuel Yosef Agnon, prompted a Canadian friend, Carl Rosenberg, editor of *Outlook*, to send me, so as to correct my ignorance, a third, previously unknown and significantly shorter lecture by Borges. It was delivered in the same institution in 1967, approximately a year after Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize, which he shared with the German poet Nelly Sachs.

In "On Sh. Y. Agnon," which I hereby reconstruct in English (the Spanish transcription is awful), Borges mentions, in passing, Agnon's edition of the *Tales the Ba'al Shem-Tov*. He also refers to *Days of Awe*, which Schocken issued in 1965 in the United States, under the supervision of Nathan Glatzer, with one of those elongated subtitles more suitable for poetry slams than for libraries: "Being a treasury of traditions, legends and learned commentaries concerning Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur and the days between, culled from three hundred volumes, ancient and new". But as the nonbeliever he was-and even less an enthusiast of religious rituals-Borges prefers *Contes de Jérusalem* (1959), which he read in the French rendition of Rachel and Guy Casaril. The anthology includes nine of Agnon's tales, among them "Forevermore," "Tehila," "The Whole Loaf," "Ido and Enam," and "Orange Peel: A Fantasy." Here is Borges:

I begin with some considerations that run the risk of appearing digressive but which should take us to the essential theme: the personality and oeuvre of our great contemporary, Shmuel Yosef Agnon. My ignorance of Hebrew-ignorance which I deplore but which it's late to remedy it-has forced me to judge him through Days of Awe, about the Jewish liturgical year; and Contes de Jérusalem. I'll limit myself to the astonishment I've experienced in these volumes, the latter especially.

Let me ask a simple yet complex question, which is what all questions are: What is a nation? My first reaction is to offer a geographical answer, but it would be insufficient. Instead, let us envision a nation as the series of memories stored at the heart of a people. George Bernard Shaw was once asked: How much suffering is humankind able to bear? His answer was that the suffering of a single individual is enough and is also the limit. In other words, the limit might be an abstraction, although the suffering itself is real. And so, if misery is impossible to measure in collective terms, how might one define a nation?

To me there isn't a clearer example of a nation than Israel, whose origins are almost confused with those of the world entire, and who reaches us today after much misery and exile. A nation is made of the accumulated memory of successive generations. In itself, memory is often approached in a couple of ways: as a barren collection of dates, names and locations; and as a catalog of curiosities. But there's another approach neither endorsed by historians, nor by students of folklore: memory as experience incarnated in people. This, precisely, is what I find in Agnon.

Contes de Jérusalem ought to be read like one reads Dante: as a series of tales, at once tragic and humorous; and as a set of symbols. Agnon enables us to appreciate ancient Jewish tradition through a game of mirrors. In it he also invites us to recognize the role of Hasidism. Unquestionably, the Hasidic tales compiled by Martin Buber and, in his early years, by Agnon too, left an indelible imprint on him. For instance, "Ido and Enam," filled with mystery, is the bizarre tale of a scholar who, in an act of revelation, sees ninety-nine words of an unknown language. Ninety-nine are also the names of God; the Tetragrammaton, which is the hundredth one, is infallible. Indirectly, Agnon recalls in his pages the legend of the Golem, made out of sand by means of words by a Cabalist in Prague's Jewish quarter.

I shall now refer to "The Whole Loaf," a story about chance. It reminds me of Kafka, who is part of Jewish memory too. Agnon chronicles the infinite yet minuscule obstacles undergone by its hungry protagonist as he prepares for the Sabbath. Whereas Kafka was about the lack of hope, or else about a hope so remote it generates in us a terrible feeling of desperation, Agnon is patient: he waits because he's a believer. Indeed, one of the right decisions the Swedish Academy made recently was not to award its Nobel Prize to a writer of sadness and despair. Instead, it honored one who, like Bernard Shaw, also a laureate, is sensitive to tragedy but knows that a joyful conclusion to the human quest isn't altogether beyond us.

Another story in Contes de Jérusalem is about a country that could be any country. This one in particular is punished with a drought marked by an inexorably blue sky. Furthermore, enemies are always on the attack, the earth is barren and rivers are empty. The population is divided into two parties: on one side are the cover-headed, on the other the naked-headed. [...] The two parties are ready to destroy each other. Yet there's a single individual who is beyond any affiliation. He furtively leaves the city, praying for God to send a compassionate storm to stop the destruction. When the others find out, they excommunicate him. His sin: not to have alerted the authorities to his wishes.

A decision is then made to have everyone build a huge tent for protection from the storm,

which must be large enough to cover the entire country. A commission is established to decide what name to give to the tent. Alternative commissions take the responsibility of studying the etymology and orthography of the chosen name. As the population wastes its energy in trivialities, God allows rain to fall-and the barren land is fertilized, just as modern Israel itself was fertilized. I hear a distant echo in Agnon's story of the Jewish tradition that says that every generation includes a total of thirty-six just men. By the way, this tradition was studied by Max Brod, Kafka's friend. Unacquainted with one another, these just men navigate the world and are replaced as soon as they die. Right now their dynasty redeems us.

Israel's memory is in Agnon-not an erudite but a living memory. He is known through a pseudonym; he didn't write for his own vanity. Somehow he knew he was the living memory of that admirable people to which, beyond the vicissitudes of blood, we all belong: the people of Israel.

The interest in Agnon is part of Borges' admiration for Israel as a young nation. His relationship with the Jewish state was ambivalent at first and only in later years-when he himself became an institutional luminary-did he soften his approach to it. It isn't that Borges was critical of Zionism. In fact, judging by his work, he seems to have a limited knowledge of it. International politics didn't interest him in the least. He seldom talked about Theodor Herzl, not even about Eliezer ben Yehuda, credited for the modern revival of the Hebrew language.

I said before that Borges visited Israel. He was there twice. The second time was in 1971, when he received the Jerusalem Prize. The first trip came at the invitation of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. It was in recognition of his philo-Semitism, and in particular of his positive views on Israel. He had been active in the Casa Argentina en Israel-Tierra Santa, a project that sought to build in Jerusalem an Argentine cultural center. He also was the first to write in *Sur* (no.254, September-October 1958). In the autobiographical essay published in *The New Yorker*, Borges stated:

Early in 1969, invited by the Israeli government, I spent ten very exciting days in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I brought home the conviction of having been in the oldest and the youngest of nations, of having come from a very living, vigilant land to a half-asleep nook of the world. Since my Geneva days, I had always been interested in Jewish culture, thinking of it as an integral element of our so-called Western civilization, and during the Israeli-Arab war of a few years back I found myself taking immediately sides. While the outcome was still uncertain, I wrote a poem on the battle. A week later, I wrote another on the victory. Israel was, of course, still an armed camp at the time of my visit. There, along the shores of Galilee, I kept recalling these lines from Shakespeare:

*Over whose acres walk'd those blessed feet,
Which fourteen hundred years ago, were nail'd
For our advantage, on the bitter cross.*

Actually, Borges wrote three poems while in Israel, collected in *In Praise of Darkness* (1969). All were later included in his *Obras Completas*. These poems have been rendered

into English before. Herein my own version. First, "To Israel":

Who shall tell if you, Israel, are to be found
In the lost labyrinth of secular rivers
That is my blood? Who shall locate the places
Where my blood and yours have navigated?
It doesn't matter. I know you're in the Sacred
Book that comprehends Time, rescued in history
By the red Adam, as well as by the memory
And agony of the Crucified One.
You're in the Book that is the mirror
Of each face approaching it,
As well as God's face, which, in its complex
And hard crystal, is appreciated in terror.
Long live Israel, who keeps God's wall
In your passionate battle.

"Israel":

A man incarcerated and bewitched,
a man condemned to be the serpent
that keeps the infamous gold,
a man condemned to be Shylock,
a man wandering through the globe,
knowing he had been in Paradise,
an old and blind man who ought to tear down
the temple columns,
a face condemned to be a mask,
a man who in spite of humankind
is Spinoza and the Baal Shem and the Kabbalists,
a man that is a Book,
a mouth praising heaven's justice
from the abyss,
an attorney or a dentist
who talked with God in a mountain,
a man condemned to ridicule
and abomination, a Jew,
an ancient man,
burnt and drowned in lethal chambers,
an obstinate man who is immortal
and now has returned to battle,
to the violent light of victory,
beautiful like a lion at noon.

And "Israel, 1969":

I feared Israel would be threatened,
with sweet insidious,
by the nostalgia that secular diasporas
accumulated, like sorrowful treasure,
in the cities of the infidel, the *juderías*,
the twilight of the steppe, the dreams-
the nostalgia of those who, near the waters of Babylon,
longed for you, Jerusalem.
What else were you, Israel, if not that nostalgia,
the will to safe-keep,
from the inconstant shapes of time,
your old magical book, your liturgy,
your solitude with God?
I was wrong. The oldest of nations
is also the youngest.
You haven't been tempted by gardens,
otherness and boredom,
but by the rigor of the last frontier.
Israel has announced, without words:
you shall forget who you are-
you shall leave behind your previous self.
You shall forget who you were in those lands
that gave you their afternoons and mornings
and which you shall no longer cherish.
You shall forget your parents' tongue
and learn the tongue of Paradise.
You shall be an Israeli. You shall be a soldier.
You shall build the homeland with swamps,
you shall erect it in deserts.
Your brother shall work with you, he whose face you haven't seen before.
Only one thing is promised:
your place in the battlefield.

There's a strange, triumphant, pompous (almost unBorgesian) tone and tune to these poems. They eulogize the Six-Day War figuratively, in the abstract, without placing it in context: The oldest of nations is also the youngest. Whoever is interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict won't get an uninterested picture though them. Instead, the reader appreciates a blind fervor. In these poems, the political Borges, a Borges I will discuss in the next section, makes one of his earliest appearances.

Borges and the Jews

By Ilan Stavans



Part IV: Deutsches Requiem

Who shall tell me if you, Israel, are to be found in the lost labyrinth

of the secular rivers that is my blood?

-J.L.B., "To Israel"

The consensus among Borges' biographers and critics is that he was deeply apolitical and that, throughout his life, he remained disengaged with, even apathetic to, local, national, and international affairs. There is some truth to this position, but taking it at face value runs the risk of oversimplifying his position. It is true that Borges was, especially in his adolescence, a dilettante à la Oscar Wilde minus the ornamental outspokenness. But he invariably managed to volunteer political comments on current events, even if these comments were saturated with sarcasm and parody, which at times made them appear to be the remarks of an amateur. And yet, they were quite forceful, not to say acerbic.

For instance, Borges denounced Hitler almost from the start, decrying the arrival of Nazism as a catastrophe for German culture. A partial yet enlightening record of his opinions is to be found *Selected Nonfiction*, edited by Eliot Weinberger. It includes a full section devoted to the years 1937-1945. Many of the pieces in it are well known to English-language readers, but a handful are not; and a few among them are hereby translated for the first time.

Of the entire bunch, only a small portion address the events in Europe; still, they are significant in that they allow a glimpse of Borges' beliefs and the trenchant style with which he debunked nasty stereotypes. In one, "A Pedagogy of Hatred," he attacks the publication in Germany of the children's book *Trau keinem Fuchs auf gruener Heid und keinem Jud bei seinem Eid* [Don't Trust Any Fox from a Heath or Any Jew on his Oath], which, according to the Argentine, "has already sold 51,000 copies." He adds: "Displays of hatred are even more obscure and denigrating than exhibitions," then proceeds to dissect the anti-Semitic volume. Herein the translation by Suzanne Jill Levine included in Weinberger's *Selected Non-Fiction*:

Take any page: for example, page 5. Here I find, not without justifiable bewilderment, this didactic poem-"The German is a proud man who knows how to work and struggle. Jews detest him because he is so handsome and enterprising"-followed by an equally informative and explicit quatrain: "Here's a Jew, recognizable to all, the biggest scoundrel in the whole kingdom. He thinks he's wonderful, and he's horrible." The engravings are more astute: the German is a Scandinavian, eighteen-year-old athlete, plainly portrayed as a worker; the Jew is a dark Turk, obese and middle-aged. Another sophistic feature is that the German is clean-shaven and the Jew, while bald, is very hairy. (It is well known that German Jews are Ashkenazim, copper-haired Slavs. In this book they are presented as dark half-breeds so that they'll appear to be the exact opposite of the blond beasts. Their attributes also include the permanent use of a fez, a rolled cigar, and ruby rings.)

Borges ends his exposition as follows: "What can one say about such a book? Personally, I am outraged, less for Israel's sake than for Germany's, less for the offended community than for the offensive nation."

The list of Borges' anti-Nazi nonfiction rejoinders includes another piece, this one drafted in 1938, where he complains of the fact that in a revised edition done by Johannes Rohr to *Geschichte der deutschen National-Literatur*, by A.F.C. Vilmar, a number of entries on Goethe, Lessing, and Nietzsche have been mutilated, and the catalogue that includes seven hundred authors "incredibly, silences the name of Heine." The Argentine was an unequivocal admirer of German literature and was distressed by its decline. "I don't know if the world can do without German civilization, he wrote in the high-brow magazine *Sur*, edited by his loyal friend and admirer, Victoria Ocampo; and, in another issue of the same journal, he stated: "It is unarguable that a [German] victory would see the ruin and debasement of the world."

Obviously, this type of erudite judgment could only have a limited impact on public opinion. Still, Borges, perhaps because no other channel fitted him well, regularly used the word -printed, oral-to denounce the excesses of fascism. And yet, the outside world succeeded in reminding him that Germanophilia was on the rise in Argentina. In 1939 a small incident, narrated without consequence by some biographers, brought the war closer to home. In Punta del Este, Uruguay, the British attempted to sink the *Graf Spee*, a German battleship. The ship took refuge in Montevideo but was dispelled by the Uruguayan government, at the time in support of the Allies. The British fleet awaited the ship, which the German crew itself eventually sank and the Germans escaped to Argentina.

This result was discouraging, but to Borges and others, it only confirmed the country's endorsement of Nazism. This openness to receiving refugees from Germany would continue until after World War II, when former officers and soldiers, with fake passports, were allowed entrance and protection, at times making a life in the same neighborhoods where survivors of concentration camps and other Jewish refugees had moved. Probably the most famous of these is Adolf Eichman, whose case became a *cause célèbre* when, having been located by the Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, the Israeli Secret Service *Mossad*, in a thunderbolt rescue operation, flew him out of Argentina and into Israel before the news was made public worldwide.

Finally, in an essay of 1940 that is probably the most important one-surely the most discussed-by the Argentine on the topic, called "Definition of a Germanophile," Borges openly ridiculed "Germanophiles" [*germanófilos*] in his country. He portrayed them as monstrous people whose knowledge of German civilization is sketchy at best and who indulge in obvious acts of censorship of the most egregious form of their own culture, often verging on Anglophobia as they foolishly describe the excesses of the English people in Europe. These Germanophiles, Borges states, are nothing but admirers of Hitler, "not in spite of the high-altitude bombs and the rumbling invasions, the machine guns, the accusations and lies, but because of those acts and instruments." He then adds:

He is delighted by evil and atrocity. The triumph of Germany does not matter to him; he wants the humiliation of England and a satisfying burning of London. He admires Hitler as he once admired his precursors in the criminal underworld of Chicago. The discussion becomes impossible because of the offenses I ascribe to Hitler are, for him, wonders and virtues... The Hitlerist is always a spiteful man, and a secret and sometimes public worshiper of criminal 'vivacity' and cruelty. He is, thanks to a poverty of imagination, a

man who believes that the future cannot be different from the present, and that Germany, till now victorious, cannot lose. He is the cunning man who longs to be on the winning side.

By the time the war ended, Borges was forty-six. He greeted the news of the liberation of Paris with a sense of inexhaustible exhilaration. That exhilaration he articulated in full in an essay that has been insufficiently read, and even less often studied in detail: "A Comment on August 23, 1944." In it Borges discusses the multiple contradictions of the many Argentineans that supported Nazism. He lists their contradictions, which he prefers to call "incoherences."

I hereby list a handful: they adore the German race, but they abhor "Saxon" America; they condemn the articles of Versailles, but they applaud the wonders of the *Blitzkrieg*; they are anti-Semitic, but they profess a religion of Hebrew origin; ... [and] they idolize San Martín, but they regard the independence of America as a mistake. The last paragraph of the essay reverberates in Borges' fiction, as I will show later:

For Europeans and Americans, one order and only one is possible; it used to be called Rome, and now it is called Western Culture. To be a Nazi (to play the energetic barbarian, Viking, Tartar, sixteenth-century conquistador, gaucho, or Indian) is, after all, mentally and morally impossible. Nazism suffers from unreality, like [John Scotus] Erigena's hell. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, wound or kill for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph. I shall risk this conjecture: Hitler wants to be defeated. Hitler is blindly collaborating with the inevitable armies that will annihilate him, as the metal vultures and the dragon (which must have known that they were monsters) collaborated, mysteriously, with Hercules.

The italicized sentence--"Hitler wants to be defeated"--by Borges himself, is, in my eyes, a paradigm: Hitler wanted to succeed in his campaign to dominate the planet, the Argentine argues, yet, upon realizing that the endeavor is impossible, he deliberately sought to be crushed, e.g., he indulged in an effort that could only culminate in his own defeat. For this defeat Hitler saw as a triumph: a triumph of evil over good, a triumph of barbarism over civilization.

The paradigm is best articulated in another aspect of Borges' response to Nazism: his fiction. I shall now devote my attention to it, but not before offering a handful of comments that should serve as counterpoint to the inventory of quotes and reflections I've submitted so far. While in his nonfiction the Argentine regularly discussed the impact of fascism at home, in his stories he took a different route: every tale on the subject is set in Europe, from Czechoslovakia to Germany itself. Why is this so?

Perhaps because these stories allowed Borges to tackle the issue frontally, to go to the source; and because he knew well that, since these pieces were in Spanish, their immediate impact would take place in Argentina. Another significant feature is that none of these fictions takes place inside a concentration camp, nor do they make reference to gas chambers or any other method of extermination. And yet, they tackle the Holocaust fearlessly, in a fashion far more overt than almost anything produced by Argentine literati in those decades.

"*Deutches Requiem*" is a Holocaust story, yet also, curiously, a story about faith, endurance, and posterity-but of a different sort. As fiction it is flawed, yet it contains the seed of a more mature, developed viewpoint by Borges than the majority of the nonfiction pieces about the war that I listed above. He drafted "*Deutches Requiem*" a bit later than "The Secret Miracle" and it was collected in his subsequent collection of stories: *The Aleph* (1949).

In the story, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, the narrator, is a former German officer who in his youth was an avid reader of Schopenhauer and a listener of Brahms but who, somehow, became attached to the Nazi party, rising in 1941 to become subdirector of the Tarnowitz concentration camp. Zur Linde, from his cell, offers a diatribe about the battle for Nazi supremacy of the globe and, thus, delivers a justification to Hitler's actions. Borges, of course, uses the character as a springboard to explore the psyche of a "Germanophile."

Toward the last third of the story, though, Zur Linde comes across a camp inmate who changes forever his views: the famous poet David Jerusalem. Is it emblematic that none of these characters, Zur Linde and Jerusalem-and Hladik too, for that matter-are real-life individuals? By all means: Borges prefers to work on composites, seeking to define archetypal figures that represent not one single person but humanity as a whole. This quality of unreality is, in fact, what the Argentine is after: a sense that people are not as different from one another as they might believe themselves to be; instead, that they are version, or at best variations, of a Platonic ideal. The following lines, in a footnote by an anonymous editor in "*Deutches Requiem*" (it is Borges himself, of course), ratify this assumption:

In neither the files nor the published work of Sögel does Jerusalem's name appear. Nor does one find it in the histories of German literature. I do not, however, think that this is an invented figure. Many Jewish intellectuals were tortured in Tarnowitz on the orders of Otto Dietrich zur Linde, among them the pianist Emma Rosenzweig. "David Jerusalem" is perhaps a symbol for many individuals. We are told that he died on March 1, 1943; on March 1, 1939, the narrator had been wounded at Tilsit. [Ed.]

In any event, the protagonist says of Jerusalem that he was "the prototypical Sephardic Jew, although he belonged to the depraved and hated Ashkenazim." He becomes obsessed with his victim: the talent of his hexameters, the capacity to consecrate his genius to hymns of happiness. His obsession and his admiration accentuate his repulsion. In due time, he drives Jerusalem insane, and forces him to commit suicide. By killing Jerusalem, zur Linde trusts that he will be able to eradicate his own compassion.

But sooner rather than later he realizes that what we must detest in the outer world has a chamber in our own soul; that those we hold as victims are actually an essential part of ourselves. It is here where the italicized sentence from Borges' above-mentioned essay "A Comment on August 23, 1944" acquires its full meaning. *Hitler wants to be defeated*: as the Nazi ponders his own destiny, he acknowledges that everything in the universe that is evil is the reverse of good and, therefore, Nazism and Judaism are two sides of the same coin. He also admits that Hitler not only brought along, but also wanted, his own ruin. Worse even, he announces that the Führer did not fight for the German nation only but for all nations--since every man is all men, each of us simultaneously beautiful and abominable.

Peronismo

This paradox is an attractive idea, which, unfortunately, history often corroborates. Hitler's demise, for instance, coincided, on the Argentinian national front, with the ascent to power of Juan Domingo Perón, another brutal dictator, one with deceitful Socialist aspirations; thus, the era of *Peronismo* begun, and in it Borges once again was, willy-nilly, an active participant. Perón emulated Mussolini and other European tyrants by instigating rowdy youthful groups and by channeling their impetus against Jewish targets, from student groups to full-fledge institutions. During the first of his two regimes, between 1943 and 1945, a series of anti-Semitic events orchestrated by the *Alianza Libertadora Nacionalista* took place, in Buenos Aires in particular.

The endorsement of Nazi values by Perón and his followers was disturbing to Borges, by then a celebrity among a small but solid intellectual elite, and also among a few fans in France. In a series of declarations, he showed signs of deep concern: "The situation in Argentina," he said, "is very serious, so serious that a great number of Argentines are becoming Nazis without being aware of it. Tempted by promises of social reform-in a society that undoubtedly needs a better organization than the one it now has-many people are letting themselves be seduced by an outside wave of hatred that is sweeping the country. It is a terrible thing, similar to what happened at the beginning of fascism and Nazism [in Europe]." It was during this period that Borges not only suffered public affront, as one *peronista* after another attacked or ridiculed him; he also was the target of personal humiliation. His mother and sister were arrested and put in prison for a brief period of time, and he himself was demoted from librarian at the Miguel Cané Public Library to the job of inspector of poultry and rabbits in the municipal market of Calle Córdoba, a gesture by the tyrant's entourage of the kind of respect that a figure like Borges truly deserved.

Borges' reaction, in return, was, as expected, nothing short of dignified: he never lost his composure as he transformed this affront, though metaphor, into a lucid assemblage of essays and stories. Among them was a collaboration with his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares under the pseudonym of H. Bustos Domecq called "*Monsterfest*" (*La fiesta del monstruo*) and published in 1955. A handful of Perón's supporters saw their idol equated to Hitler and, at a time of international remorse about the excesses of Nazism, were offended by it. But they were more offended by the man of letters himself, who, in their view, refused to recognize Perón as the carrier of *una nueva Argentina*. None of this deterred Borges in his quest to unveil the brutal side of the nation's populist leader, nor did it diminish his love for one of Perón's guinea pigs: the Jews.

The Xeroxed Jew

In a conversation of 1978, by then old and blind, Borges stated (and I translate): "The preeminence of the Jewish in Western Civilization has to do with the fact that a Jew, aside from being English, French, German or whatever, is always a Jew. He is not tied by any form of loyalty or especial tradition, which allows him to innovate in science and the arts. In that sense, to be an Argentine offers an advantage similar to that of the Jew." By this he meant that Argentines might be Hispanic Americans but also and more emphatically, citizens of the world. To which he added the following in a conversation with Antonio

Carrizo four years later: "There are some people that see the Jew as a problem. I see in him a solution."

This view is manifested, as an esthetic doctrine, in a lecture Borges delivered in Buenos Aires in 1951, called "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." In part, he was responding to T.S. Eliot's own views included in his 1919 piece "Tradition and the Individual Talent." But there's much more, including his intention to revamp Argentine letters from the bottom up. In the lecture he described the local writer in derogatory terms. He said: "The native Argentine, in my understanding, is sardonic, suspicious, over and above everything without illusions, and so utterly lacking in verbal grandiosity that in few can it be forgiven and in none extolled."

Borges wondered what are the themes the Argentine writer should address. He answered by discussing a tangential argument in Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which Gibbon suggests that "in the Arabian book *par excellence*, in the Koran, there are no camels." Borges argues:

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

Borges wished to see his own role in the world beyond the ghettoized confines of regionalism. By the way, it is the exact same feeling he projects toward the English language: it wasn't his fully, but he would do anything possible to appropriate it. And indeed, his fiction is filled with local types, but their presence is sheer artifice. He turned these local types into a Platonic archetype. And therein his most enduring contribution: he showed that in Latin America, all of us are Xerox copies of a European original, yet in a relativistic world where nothing feels authentic anymore, a Xerox is equally, if not more, valuable than the so-called original.

The Buenos Aires lecture includes a bonus:

What is Argentine tradition? I believe that this question poses no problem and can easily be solved. I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have. Here I remember an essay by Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the intellectual preeminence of Jews in Western culture. He wonders if this preeminence authorizes us to posit an innate Jewish superiority and answers that it does not; he says that Jews are prominent in Western culture because they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any special devotion; therefore, he says, it will always be easier for a Jew than for a non-Jew to make innovations in Western culture.

In admiring the Jew as a wandering type, Borges sought to promote the type of literature unconfined to borders, a literature beyond patriotism-universal, belonging to everyone. That universality, in his eyes, was Jewish. What he strove for, as the Xeroxed Jew that he was, was to make the patrimony of the Argentine writer not a little piece of land near the South Pole but the globe entire. And, through his effort, he wanted to be within that culture and at the same time not to feel bound to it. Toward the end of the lecture, he asked his fellow Argentine writers to be bold, innovative, and free, just as Jews in Western culture were. "We should essay all themes, and we cannot limit ourselves to purely Argentine subjects in order to be Argentine; for either being Argentine is an inescapable act of fate-and in that case we shall be so in all events-or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask."
