

PIOTR MRÓZ*, ŁUKASZ W. ŚLIWA**

(Jagiellonian University)

Literature of Exhaustion. Borges, Kabbalah and the Art of Divine Forgetting

ABSTRACT

With this short essay we look at the work of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges from a different angle, and propose a new framework for the interpretation of his stories, by indicating their affinity with esoteric tradition, especially the Kabbalah. The work of Borges has met with much criticism which, in our opinion, is a result of the fact that his essays were created under a strong influence from traditions and ideas weakly represented in the main current of western literature. The first part of this essay is a brief introduction to the issue. The second part focuses more on the sources of what we here call, after Stanisław Lem, a “system of fantastical philosophy of Borges.”

KEYWORDS

Jorge Luis Borges, Izaak Luria, *ayn*, utopia, esotericism, Kabbalah

* Institute of Philosophy
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: piotr.mrozuj@gmail.com

** Institute of Philosophy
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: lukasz.wiktorsliwa@gmail.com

LITERARY DUELS: BORGES VERSUS “CONDE” GOMBROWICZ

“A philosopher of poetry and a poet of philosophy”¹ – this characteristic of Borges, rightly observes Ignacio Infante, can be found among many Internet sources of the Borges Center.

Numerous interpreters of works by this Blind Librarian are in the spell of his *oeuvre*. Hundreds if not thousands of pages are written every year, aimed at finding the right shelf on which we ought to place this literature; find the right word, *penuria nominum*, that would name the genre; to show the relationships, connecting lines, affinities, and hidden sources that the works of Borges conceal so ingeniously. However, Borges himself still seems to be avoiding all rigid determinations; his literature is more like a *hrönhir* – a dreamed, fantastical artifact from the universe of Tlön (the semi-utopian world created and depicted by Borges in one of the *cuentos* published under the same title) that haunts our world; it appears and disappears when we think about it, never losing its elusive nature. This is so, probably because in his works Borges constantly exceeds the strict boundaries that divide the world of ideas, and the world of poetical imagination. In fact, as the Epilogue to *Otras inquisitiones* shows, the main ambition of this type of literature was to: “evaluate religious or philosophical ideas on the basis of their aesthetic worth and even for what is singular and marvelous about them.”² This attitude, this way of handling the philosophical tradition, has earned much criticisms, among which we can mention, for example, Ernesto Sábato, who accused Borges of manipulating tradition, whilst his erudition being non-rigorous, amateurish and playing only a decorative role in his writing.³ Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon* wrote about Borges that: “His best work lacks variety, even though it draws upon the entire Western Canon.”⁴ In his *Trans-Atlantyck*, the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz created a famous literary silhouette of Borges that shares a common point with a critical response to his literature we have just mentioned:

¹ I. Infante, *Abominable Mirrors: On the Macabre Hyperfictions of Jorge Luis Borges*, “Variaciones Borges” 2001, No. 12, pp. 193–232.

² J. L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, trans. R. Simms, New York 1966, p. 201.

³ E. Sábato, *Acera de la crítica de los cuentos de Borges*, “Cuadernos Hispano-americanos” 1979, pp. 145–158, cited after: D. T. Jaen, *The Esoteric Tradition in Borges Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, “Studies in Short Fiction” 1984, No. 84, p. 25.

⁴ H. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, New York 1994, p. 471.

That man (and haply so strange a man for the first time in my life had I seen) was uncommonly pampered and, what is more, was still pampering himself. In a greatcoat, behind large black glasses as if behind a fence from the whole world shut off, around his neck a silk scarf with demi-pearl grey dots on it, on his hands demi-gloves of black cambric, on his head a hat, demi-brimmed, black. [...] In pockets papers aplenty, scripts the which he ceaselessly mislaid, and underarm books. Of intelligence enormously subtle the which he in himself all the time ensubtled, distilled, in every utterance of his so intelligently intelligent he was that the women's and men's delighted clucks arose (even though they inspect Socks, ties). [...] Looking into his books, notes, mislaying them, wallowing, weltering in them, with rare quotations he sprinkled his thought and capered with it to and for himself, as in a solitary. And so whimsically coddling himself in paper and thought, all the more intelligently intelligent he was, and that intelligence of his, multiplied by itself and a-straddled on itself, was becoming so Intelligent that Jesus Maria!⁵

In *Trans-Atlantyk* we encounter a bizarre “erudite duel” that takes place between the narrator (who can be, without a doubt, identified with Gombrowicz himself) and this literary incarnation of Borges. The Blind Librarian is juggling papers, quotations, surnames and, as a result, easily overcomes Gombrowicz: “I was left with no words for I had lost my tongue! And the scoundrel, he had made me mute so that I had no words as what is mine is not mine, apparently stolen!”⁶

Apparently, Gombrowicz did not forget this abasement, this ‘larceny,’ since many years later he would devote several pages of his famous *Diary* to Borges. What is noteworthy, it seems like he did not change his attitude toward the Argentinian writer:

And I don't doubt that he will get the Nobel. [...] it is as he had come to existence expressly for this purpose. [...] Literature for literatti, something like a special kind of writing for members of the jury, this is exactly the kind of candidate that is needed: an abstract artist, scholastic, metaphysical, unoriginal enough to find the road already paved, original enough in this unoriginality of his to become a new and even creative variant of something known and recognized.⁷

Gombrowicz was unable to appreciate the work of Borges, for to him this kind of literature was a mere legerdemain; a scholastic and formalistic jugglery, a stunt of erudition without any deeper content; *l'art pour art*. Unlike Borges, Gombrowicz was not a librarian; the books were neither his main passion, nor was he a collector of them. The lecture of recently published

⁵ W. Gombrowicz, *Trans-Atlantyk*, trans. C. French, N. Krasov, London 1994, p. 53.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁷ *Idem*, *Diary. Volume III*, trans. L. Valle, Northwestern University Press 1993, p. 6.

personal notes of Gombrowicz (*Kronos*) reveals that he was a fundamentally different personality than Borges. He was a collector of experience, impressions, and adventures (or rather: he pretended or tried to be like that), and his passion was not for books, but for life in all its glory and horror. *Condé*⁸ Gombrowicz, a hypochondriac and seducer at the same time, could not accept literature which, in his own eyes, encloses itself in a sultry library hall, insensitive to this most horrifying phenomenon: the Universe itself – this everlasting “black current under my feet” as Michał P. Markowski refers to it in his commentary on Gombrowicz’s *Cosmos*.⁹

Cosmos for me is black, primarily black, something like a black stream, turbulent, full of whirlpools, obstacles and flooded areas, carrying a mass of refuse, and in this stream a besotted man, at the mercy of the waters, trying to decipher and to understand so that he can assemble what he sees into some whole.¹⁰

RADICAL UTOPIA: STANISŁAW LEM ON BORGES

But Gombrowicz is not the only Polish writer who had left a commentary dedicated to the works of Borges, and certainly his voice on this subject is not the prevailing one and cannot be considered to be the universal representation of the entire Polish literary world. There are other writers, whose commentary on the Argentinian stand in stark contrast to Gombrowicz’s. Here, we would like to mention one name in particular: Stanisław Lem. The voice of Lem is valuable here not only on the basis of the fact that he is considered alongside Philip K. Dick, Strugatsky Brothers, Stapledon, George Orwell or Mikhail Zamyatin (and Borges of course) to be one of the masters of fantastic literature, but also due to the fact that, similarly to Borges, Lem was a man of books, an erudite, frequently presenting himself first and foremost as a philosopher, and then as a writer, (much like Borges himself). What we are trying to say is that Lem could appreciate the work of Borges much better than Gombrowicz, and was closer to grasping the real form of this kind of literature, its true nature.

⁸ “Why, everybody knows I’m no count, yet a few years ago I pronounced myself a count in Cafe Rex [...] and for a while I would be summoned to the phone «*Conde Gombrowicz*». This only lasted for a while because my friends from the Cafe Rex got ahold of a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* where they read that every Pole traveling abroad is a count”. *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁹ M. P. Markowski, *Czarny nurt. Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*, Kraków 2004.

¹⁰ W. Gombrowicz, D. De Roux, *A Kind of Testament: Interviews with Dominique de Roux*, trans. A. Hamilton, London 1973.

Inspired probably by the work of Gérard Genette, who, in his *L'utopie littéraire*, writes that Borges' work seems to be possessed (*semble possédée*) by a "strange demon of reconciliation" (*d'un étrange démon du rapprochement*),¹¹ and that at least part of this work can be reduced to a brief catalogue of various intonations of one peculiar idea, a theme or a single metaphor. Lem seems to agree with this act of recognition expressed by Genette when he points out that "Borges does not bend under the excess of new ideas,"¹² and that it is better to read his stories separately rather than in series, on pain of their mutual similarities becoming unbearable.

Although Lem accepts Genette's perspective that we can treat Borges' work as an example of a utopian writing (and thus Borges himself as a utopian *par excellence*), Lem goes even further when he writes that: "Borges' work is almost always based on peculiar *ontic* assumptions"¹³ and, what is more, according to Lem the main aim of this operation is to depict a special type of utopia, which is in fact always a presentation or "a model of a certain ontology, an expression of the structural properties of a fantastic society."¹⁴ Lem states that Borges, in his literature, is: "modeling a utopia" only to "depict an artificial community that could realize – by its peculiar way of living – a plan or a system of a certain fantastic philosophy."¹⁵ Thus Lem suggests that in the case of Borges, the use of tools specific to the tradition of utopian writing is not only based on their merely aesthetic value, but contrary to the critical voices of Bloom, Gombrowicz or Sábato, this feature of his literary work contributes much to its great originality. Lem says that as a utopian writer, Borges always leads the narration of his stories to a certain *composito oppositorum*, which results in the elimination of contradictions, which in turn creates an impression of a hermetic and limited world: an island. It is probably not a coincidence that the first example of utopian writing – *Utopia* by Thomas Moore – is a depiction of an island. In fact every example of utopian as well as dystopian writing seems to follow this metaphor at least to some extent. Borges' innovation is based on his radicalism: his *cuentos* are "crafted" to present a closed universe – a universe without history (because the history just ended with the closing sentence of the story), harmonious (because all the contradictions have been eliminated or explained), timeless (because everything that had to be told has been told), but not necessarily exhib-

¹¹ G. Genette, *L'utopie littéraire*, [in:] idem, *Figures I*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 123.

¹² S. Lem, *Fantastyka i futurologia*, t. II, Krakow 2003, p. 368 [all translations by the authors].

¹³ Ibidem, p. 363.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

iting a strict boundary, nor a visible or a distinct centre. This is the new element Borges invented and applied to the slightly worn out and well-known genre of utopia: *la specialité de la maison* in terms of his writing. In fact, what makes Borges special in this case is the radicalism of his utopian programme. He is the creator of probably the most ‘baroque’ and ambitious visions of utopian worlds: *Tlón, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* are not only depictions of a fictional society but, what is more, they are visions of an entire planet! These visions contain descriptions of geography, history, literature, language, and philosophy.

The *Library of Babel*, probably the most famous story by Borges, offers the best example of both the displacement of a privilege centre, and the boundlessness of the presented world. The Argentinian author’s imagination has elaborated two “axioms” of this world. Firstly: “The library exists *ab aeterno*.” Secondly: “The Library is a sphere whose exact centre is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.”

But what is the purpose of this radicalisation of the concept of utopia we have just mentioned? Lem explains it as follows:

In Borges we have the unity of contradictions [...] his saint and heretic, his traitor and hero blend together harmoniously into one – only in inscrutable gaze of God; but both God and Culture represent for him the wholeness of Being, inside of which we are able to perform any operations, but we are unable to reach out from this whole. This whole is like a Mystery to him in a mystical understanding of the term, we can provide a commentary to it but we will never be able to comprehend it, and every discursive mode drives us away from it.¹⁶

It seems that what Lem suggests here is that the radicalisation of utopia in the case of Borges is intended to achieve an impression of the existence of the Mystery. But an inverted argumentation is also possible: the premonition of the existence of a certain Mystery leads to the aforementioned radicalisation. If this second assumption is correct, Lem’s interpretation would correspond to the interpretation of Borges’ works presented by us in the second part of this essay.

What seems to be the most important task now, and the main aim of this short “theoretical impression,” is to provide us with at least a cursory reconstruction of the system of the fantastical philosophy we have alluded to. However, we must note that this task is virtually impossible since we must keep in mind that in order to successfully fulfill this challenge we are about to look at the whole work of Borges as if we were looking at it through his own

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 398.

eyes, and at particular times when this literature was being born in the nooks and crannies of the home library of its creator. The difficulty arises not only because, as André Maurois puts it: “Borges has read everything,”¹⁷ but also because the work of the Argentinian writer is full of “forking paths” as well as what Ignacio Infante – perhaps with some exaggeration – called “abominable mirrors.” The fact is that the literature of Borges constitutes a great labyrinth. A long time before writers like Milorad Pavić, Georges Perec or Stuart Moulthrop entered the stage, it was Borges who invented and fully utilized a tool that we now know as “hypertext,” which successfully misleads and forever entangles every over-inquisitive reader in the insides of his literary labyrinth. “I am a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature”¹⁸ – Borges has said about himself.

OBSESSION WITH METAPHOR

“It may be that universal history is the history of the different intonations given a handful of metaphors”¹⁹ says an opening statement from the famous essay *The Sphere of Pascal*. We see that Borges’ encyclopaedic erudition is oriented to retrieve certain metaphors: cultural themes, facts, ideas, names, citations, and apocryphal texts hidden somewhere in the great labyrinth of common tradition. Borges seems to be searching for such “clues,” traces of expressive ideas, treating them as if they were cultural *nuclei*, “monads” or, with the help of a term coined by Pitirim Sorokin, cultural *vehicles*, or what Derrida calls in his *Positions*: “units of simulacrum.” More specifically: independent and separate beings; parts of a greater whole. But when combined together within the limited body of a piece of literature (*cuento*) they reveal unexpected links and affinities which sometimes help to achieve or strengthen the effect of *Unheimlich* so typical for the works of the Argentinian writer. Despite some previous declarations, the method of selecting those metaphors is based on more than just their aesthetic value. What can be termed as a “hermeneutical reading” of the works of Borges reveals that the philosophical content of his *cuentos* indicates that these collection of metaphors (their selection and composition) are not accidental, and that they seem to share

¹⁷ J. Alazraki, *Borges and Kabbalah*, “TriQuarterly” 1975, No. 25, p. 241.

¹⁸ J. L. Borges, “Foreword” to R. Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges’ Art of Allusion*, New York 1969.

¹⁹ J. L. Borges, *The Fearful Sphere of Pascal*, [in:] idem, *Labyrinths*, trans. D. Yates, J. E. Irby, New York 1962, p. 168.

some common ground, a hidden root. Any affinities that arise between them may suggest that they belong to a greater whole, which can be named as the philosophical system of Borges' fantastic philosophy. In fact, when we introduce the Derridean term *la trace*,²⁰ we may say that what Borges wanted to achieve by his own "act of writing," or rather "re-writing" of the western canon, was to track or locate a trace of this kind; that he was in a constant search for its presence, and that he tried to make it visible.²¹

The reason why Borges' writing did not meet with a proper recognition from writers like Gombrowicz or Sábato, and that to some extent it seems to contain a certain "exotic" element in itself, may be because this trace we speak of was originally located (or in other words: it takes its source) on the periphery of the main current of the Western tradition; it was less visible or could be seen as just a side effect of the tradition being developed by others.

The reason why Borges has reached for these less obvious sources of inspiration may be that he wanted to reinforce the originality of his work. That would be the first and most obvious conclusion. However, there is probably another explanation. In this case, we suggest using the distinction suggested by Leo Strauss in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, that is: the "distinction between exoteric (or public) and esoteric (or secret) teaching."²² Strauss argues that the so-called "serious writers" write esoterically, that is, with the use of multiple or multilayered meanings, often interspersed with irony or paradox, obscure references, and deliberate self-contradictions. Is it not the perfect characteristic of Borges' literary labyrinth? It certainly is, although we must keep in mind that Strauss' distinction refers primarily to the specific context of political philosophy, and only secondarily to the world of literature.

Of course we must note that when we invoke the term "esoteric tradition" hoping to shed a new light on the reconstruction of the still unrevealed system of Borges' fantastic philosophy, we are referring to the vast and heterogeneous tradition which contains such incompatible ideas like the "Secret Doctrine" of Madame Blavatsky, the *Philosophia perennis* of Aldous Huxley, Tarot, Gnosis, Kabbalah or *scientia occulta*. Most of the traditions mentioned are visible in the literary works of Borges, there is however no place in this

²⁰ See: J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore & London 1976.

²¹ "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace [...] In this way the metaphysical text is understood; it is still readable, and remains read" (idem, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D. Allison, Evanston 1973, p. 14).

²² L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago 1988 [1952].

short essay to discuss this issue in detail. Instead we have decided to choose only one tradition from those listed above – the one that in our opinion is the most significant one for the better understanding of Borges' work. For those who may feel dissatisfied with our choice, we recommend an excellent book of Didier Jaen: *Borges' Esoteric Library: Metaphysics to Metafiction*.

BORGES AS A KABBALIST?

In the year 1934 Borges published an essay under the significant title *Yo, judío* (I, the Jew), which was the writer's response to the provocations from the Peronist intellectuals gathered around the *Crisol* magazine.

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*, 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).²³

Borges' philosemitism and a fascination with the Jewish culture received a substantial critical response, and were discussed in detail by authors like Jamie Alazraki, Edna Aizenberg, Ilan Stavans, and Saul Sosnowski. Thus it is not a secret that the heritage of Jewish thought and culture (especially the Kabbalah) has a strong influence on the work of the Argentinian writer. The title story from the collection of Borges' novels, *The Aleph*, is one of the clearest examples. As mentioned above, "Borges has read everything" and there is no doubt that his library must have contained some works devoted to the issue of the Kabbalah. He in fact admitted this unequivocally:

I read a book called *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* by Scholem and another book by Trachtenberg on Jewish superstitions. Then I have read all the books on the Kabbalah I have found and all the articles in the encyclopaedias and so on.²⁴

As a result, as Alazraki puts it, "the impact of the Kabbalah on Borges' work far exceeds the random quotations or allusions the casual reader may

²³ See: *Borges A Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*, eds. E. Rodriguez Monegal, R. Alastair, New York 1981, p. 64.

²⁴ J. L. Borges, R. Christ, *Jorge Luis Borges an Interview*, "The Paris Review" 1967, No. 40, p. 162.

find and which, after all, only confirm the interest Borges conceded.”²⁵ We can go even further and say that Borges’ writing is not merely a result of the writer’s fascination with the Jewish mysticism, but it is Kabbalistic in its spirit; in its very core. Although Borges himself, due to his inborn modesty, would not accept such a strong claim, for as he writes in his *A Defense of the Kabbalah*, he has “an almost complete ignorance of Hebrew,” and thus he doubts whether he has any right to discuss what the Kabbalah really is. Despite all these declarations, Eliot Wolfson, who, being among those scholars who have greatly expanded our knowledge on this topic, undoubtedly knows the nature of the Kabbalah, readily admits that “Borges set out primarily to depict how the kabbalists stood in his imagination; however, in the process, he displayed a startlingly intuitive grasp of some of the rudimentary principles of Jewish esotericism that not only rivals but on occasion even surpasses the formulations of specialists in the field.”²⁶ George Steiner went even further than Alazraki or Wolfson and located Borges among – as he names it – the “three modern Kabbalists” (along with Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem). In his excellent book *After Babel* he writes that:

We can locate in the poetry and fictions of Borges every motif present in the language mystique of Kabbalists and Gnostics: the image of the world as a concatenation of secret syllables, the notion of an absolute idiom or cosmic letter – alpha and aleph – which underlies the rent fabric of human tongues, the supposition that the entirety of knowledge and experience is prefigured in a final tome containing all conceivable permutations of the alphabet.²⁷

As an attentive and passionate reader of authors like Scholem (who has contributed a great deal to the popularisation of Jewish thought in the West) or Buber, Borges certainly could not have omitted probably the most “poetical” and visionary representative of Jewish philosophy that is Isaac Luria. A reference to his name can be found in the novel *The Approach to al-Mu’tasim*:

With due humility, I suggest a distant and possible forerunner, the Jerusalem Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who in the sixteenth century advanced the notion that the soul of an ancestor or a master may, in order to comfort or instruct him, enter into the soul of someone who has suffered misfortune. *Ibbūr* is the name given to this variety of metempsychosis.²⁸

²⁵ J. Alazraki, *Borges and Kabbalah*, “TriQuarterly” 1975, No. 25.

²⁶ E. Wolfson, *In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah*, “The Jewish Quarterly Review” 2014, Vol. 104, No. 3, p. 364.

²⁷ G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford 1998, pp. 70–71.

²⁸ J. L. Borges, *The Approach to al-Mu’tasim*, [in:] idem, *Ficciones*, trans. A. Hurley, Penguin, 1962, p. 51.

The doctrine of *Ibbūr*, which can be seen as the Jewish version of the reincarnation of the soul, inspired Borges in several places. The most striking example can be found in the story entitled *Immortal* in which the main protagonist (*notabene*: Joseph Cartaphilus) returns, in several places of the story, first as a Roman legionary, and then as an incarnation of the Greek poet Homer. Another example of the use of the concept of *Ibbūr* can be found in *Theme of the Traitor and the Hero*. It tells the story of an investigator, Ryan, who discovers mysterious coincidences between the circumstances of the death of Julius Caesar, and the Irish revolutionary hero Fergus Kilpatrick, who was killed in a theatre on the eve of the planned revolution. He also finds similarities between his conversation with Kilpatrick on the day of his death and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. However, the most striking realisation of the doctrine of metempsychosis can be found in *The Other*, where a blind 80-year old Borges meets himself, aged 17, at a bench in Cambridge.

Your oppressed and outcast masses, are nothing but an abstraction. Only individuals exist – if, in fact, anyone does. Yesterday's man is not today's, as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps the proof of that.²⁹

But it is not the only concept within the doctrine of *Ibbūr* with which the name of Luria should be identified. We cannot present the visionary philosophy of Luria in its entirety, for, as Moshe Idel states, “[t]here can be no doubt that Lurianic Kabbalah is one of the most complex intellectual systems ever produced by a Jewish author – indeed, as Gershom Scholem has correctly asserted, by any human mind.”³⁰

THE LURIANIC KABBALAH

The central point of the whole poetical vision of the Lurianic Kabbalah is the doctrine of *Ein-Sof*, which can be translated as “without end,” “endless” or “infinite,” and the story of its reduction (*tzimtzum*), withdrawing from the state of an omnipresent being to the state of nothingness. Luria states that if we consequently understand God as being infinite, we cannot explain the existence of the world without falling into contradiction, because, as Luria points out, the act of creation requires some free space within which things may emerge; a certain act of differentiation, *principio individuations*, that will allow things to come into existence, and to multiply. But at the beginning, at

²⁹ Idem, *The Other*, [in:] idem, *The Book of Sand*, trans. N. T. di Giovanni, Emecé 1975, p. 12.

³⁰ M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, New Haven 1999, p. 170.

the origin, everything is God;³¹ everything is united with God who is *Ein-Sof*, says Luria, and thus there can be no free space because God remains the only reality: “You should know that at the beginning there was no empty or open space; the light of the Infinite was everywhere.”³² Elsewhere, Chaim Vital, one of Luria’s disciples, writes:

Know that before the emanated things were emanated and the created things were created there was a supernal light that was simple, without composition or external relations, and it filled the whole of existence. There was no empty place, ether, or void. Everything was filled with the infinite light. There was neither beginning nor end. All was one simple light in perfect equanimity.³³

To allow things to appear, and to let the process of creation begin, God must have provided free space. So, according to Luria, the Holy One did so by withdrawing himself from the world. God begins the act of self-reduction, self-concealment, until he reaches the form of a mathematical point, a dot. This conversion from a state of initial omnipresence, from a state of “being” (*Yesh*), to the state of non-being (*Ayn*) – a process of self-concealment – Luria calls *tzimtzum*.

One of the most original concepts with which the Lurianic Kabbalah is mostly identified is the idea of *tikkun ha-olam*. In brief: Lurianic Kabbalah has also been used to explain the role of prayer and ritual action in *tikkun olam*. According to this vision of the world, in order to have created the world God contracted part of Himself into vessels of light.³⁴ These vessels shattered, and their particles became sparks of light trapped within the world of creation. Contemplation and prayer to aspects of the divinity release these sparks and allow them to reunite with God’s essence, bringing them closer to a fixed world.³⁵ According to Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the physical world is connected to the spiritual, which lies beyond, disconnected from the chains of causality understood in the terms of physics. According to him, people have the ability, through good deeds and free will, to direct and control these forces. God’s act of creation stems from a desire that the creation itself will ultimate-

³¹ Ł. W. Śliwa, *Breaking of the Vessels: Kabbalistic Sources of Deconstruction. An Introduction*, “Specters of Influence 2nd International Seminar on Literature”, conference paper, Kraków 2014.

³² *The Tree of Life: Chayim Vital’s Introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria*, trans. D. W. Menzi, Z. Padeh, Northvale 1999, p. 24.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

³⁴ G. J. Blidstein, *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law*, Northvale 1997, p. 18.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

ly recognize God's unity, and overcome evil; this will constitute the perfection (*tikkun*) of creation.³⁶

Harold Bloom admits in his *The Map of Misreading* that the doctrine of *tikkun* was one of his mayor inspirations while working on his concept of *Anxiety of Influence*. This might have also been the case of Borges. His encyclopaedic universe, his great collection of different metaphors, could all be a practical realisation of the teachings of *tikkun* in the field of literary work. Linking together different concepts and ideas could be seen as an attempt at mending the world. Revealing hidden affinities and bringing into the light their aesthetic value might be seen as an attempt at building a new universal science, a system of fantastic philosophy which, for Borges, could play a kind of "auto-therapeutic" role.

DIVINE FORGETTING

Let us return to Gombrowicz for a while. His novel, *Cosmos*, to which we have referred at the beginning of this essay, is perceived as the most mysterious and profound work in his *oeuvre*. The Greek word κόσμος means "order." This semi-detective story may be interpreted as an illustration of the impossibility of building any satisfactory system of explanation. The main protagonist constantly creates bizarre chains of relations. Starting from a tiny, accidental detail he discerns in a particular situation (this could be anything: an ashtray, a stick, a needle, a woman's hand or a hanged bird), he begins building a pseudo-philosophical theory based mostly on the imposition of the law of similarity; a strange *scala naturae* which constantly leads – to his own despair – to nothing. Frustration is the main feeling experienced in *Cosmos*. For Gombrowicz, man is in a constant dialectical duel with the universe. The world appears to him primarily as chaos which needs "mending," organisation, and explanation. But each time one tries to turn the ongoing flux of reality that goes on around us into Kosmos – that is, into order – the result is always Chaos. But there is also something "erotic" in the *Cosmos* as one may notice. This whole attempt at arranging objects, this obsessive focus on the imposition of details, and a struggle to provide an explanatory and satisfying *theorem*, is so compulsive and requiring of constant repetition that – paradoxically – it begins to serve as a source of a strange pleasure. Moreover, among all of this, there is also a hopeless and pristine fascination with a *heroine* named Lena, and a sound repeated constantly, like a bizarre mantra, in all of its varieties – the mysterious word "Berg" ("Berg," "bergum," "bergowanie,

³⁶ Ibidem.

bembergiem”). “Relief” is achieved when this exhausting chain of events is finally broken: this happens with the death of one of the protagonists of the novel.

Both Borges and Gombrowicz seem to share some common ground. For both writers, the universe appears to be an inaccessible illusion; a dream or a nightmare; a constant flux of affairs; a mysterious void to which a single man has no access, or perhaps only at the cost of his own destruction. But obviously, this common truth has been presented with the help of different literary means. Another aspect that binds together these two writers is the compulsive fondness for the registration of subtitle fragments of reality with the purpose of composing them later into a greater whole. In the case of Gombrowicz, this would be his admiration for an analysis of the human body (*Rat, On Kitchen Steps, and The Event on Bradbury*) or the subtleties of everyday language (*Ferdydurke*). For Borges, it is his passion as an encyclopaedist; intellectual utopias build from constellations of philosophical or literary particles.

In his famous essay, *The Literature of Exhaustion*, John Bart places Borges among the great “masters of exhaustion.” Borges deliberately reduces the complexity and diversity of philosophical systems of selected authors *as if* they were merely fictions in the sense given to the term by Fritz Mauthner in his *Philosophie Als Ob*, with an aim to extract their inner “aesthetic value.” Then, similarly to Witold from *Cosmos*, he arranges them in a long chain of imposing similarities. The purpose for this method is to “exhaust” the vast resources of his erudite memory. The result is mainly the “radical utopia” mentioned earlier. In the world of utopia everything is in order, in its right place, and the promised land of *compositio oppositorum* is finally achieved. Utopia is a calm place, a paradise island, in which an over-trained memory of the Blind Librarian can find solace. Here, Borges can finally look into a mirror, being afraid that he will lose anything from his vision, he can finally do what he never did: forget.

In this way, Borges approaches the direct consequence of the act of *tzimtzum*, developed by the Hasid movement known as *bittul ha-yesh* – nullification of the self. We cannot however present here this doctrine and its evolution in a detail. For some kabbalists the whole of creation is in exile from itself, and overcoming this exile and alienation via *tikkun ha-olam* is mankind’s fundamental task. But to perform the act of *tikkun*, an individual must first become open to the diversity of the world, which is the consequence of the concealment of the Absolute. To do this, to purify his ego and become open, man has to reconstruct the act of concealment, which is the transition from the state of being (*Yesh*) to non-being (*Ayn*), and apply it to himself. Rabbi Dov Baer says that:

One must think of oneself as *ayin* and forget oneself totally [...]. Then one can transcend time, rising to the world of thought, where all is equal: life and death, ocean and dry land [...]. If one thinks of oneself as something, God cannot clothe Himself in him, for He is infinite, and no vessel can contain Him, unless one thinks of oneself as *ayin*.³⁷

In the linguistic-textual perspective, the Kabbalists stress that when written with the letter “aleph” *Ein-Sof* means “infinite,” but when written with letter “ayn,” it changes its meaning to “nothingness.” Dov Baer held that one must analogously convert his “I” (*ani*) into “nothing” (*ayn*). But neither the infinite character of *Ein-Sof*, nor its aspect as “nothing” can be revealed through contemplation focused on presence. “The contemplation of *Ein-sof* is not the contemplation of presence, but rather of a complete absence, a complete lack of knowledge; not a studied unknowing, but the absence of memory, and ‘I forgot,’ and perhaps even a ‘Forget I,’ a self-forgetting.”³⁸ As a result, according to several Kabbalists, a mean for apprehending *Ein-Sof* is through the process of forgetting. What is more, as Sanford Drob writes: “Interestingly, the Lurianists held that the world itself was created through a divine concealment, in effect suggesting that God forgets himself in order to create the world.”³⁹

In a way, for Borges, the act of writing might have played a peculiar auto-therapeutic role – a source of particular relief based on the act of forgetting. For Borges, memory was always illusory, even a burden, for in his view, it is essentially responsible for constituting identity – a basic obstacle in the way of dealing with the mysterious nature of the universe. It is what prevents us from overcoming the inevitable gap between the world and ourselves. The act of forgetting allows one to become open to the diversity of the world, and thus to achieve peace by overcoming this precipice. Many of his writings are devoted to this topic. They reveal the deceptive aspect of our memory or even its horrible nature, like in an example of *Funes Memoriosus*, Tzinacán from *The God’s Script* or in *Immortal*. In Borges’ case, literature reveals a certain *ab salutem* aspect; it is a tool that may help one find liberation from the limiting and vulnerable form of one’s own ego, which, for Borges, is a terrifying illusion. But the most horrifying thing to him was the possibility of carrying this burden throughout eternity. In one of his public appearances he confessed:

³⁷ D. Baer, *Or ha-Emet*, as in: D. Matt, *Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism*, in: “Essential Papers on Kabbalah”, New York 2000, p. 87.

³⁸ S. Drob, *Kabbalah and Postmodernism. A Dialogue*, New York 2009, p. 216.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

I have no desire for immortality which for me would be a nightmare. I do not want to be immortal. I want to die completely [Quiero todó morir].⁴⁰

Paradoxically, literature, the only thing that to his mind seemed to be a way of dealing with the intolerable vision of being immortal turned him into one.

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⁴⁰ *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, ed. R. Burgin, Jackson 1998, p. 174.

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