

## Reflections on the Jewish Imaginary in the Fictions of Borges

*Je ne sais trop comment célébrer ce ruisseau  
de sang israélite qui coule dans mes veines*

(J. L. Borges in a letter to his Jewish friend Abramowicz, c. 1920)<sup>1</sup>

*Toda persona occidental es griega y es judía.  
No se dirá lo mismo de las otras estirpes.*

(J. L. Borges, "Israel")

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**B**y way of introduction I should like to re-phrase a saying by Borges: "The things that are said in literature - or about Borges - are always the same. What is important is the way they are said." (Christ 259)

There exists a sizeable critical literature concerning the inspiration Borges has found in Judaism which has concentrated primarily in exploring and unearthing Jewish sources in Borges and mapping their presence in his work.<sup>2</sup> I refer among others to the pioneering work of Jaime

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Prof. Edwin Williamson for generously making available to me a copy of extracts of Borges' correspondence with Abramowicz.

<sup>2</sup>I shall recap very briefly the Jewish sources which are generally considered the most important in the formation of the Jewish imaginary in Borges. First and foremost is the Cabala, a primary fount of inspiration. Borges "misread it creatively" in Harold Bloom's terminology, admiring its blend of methodological rigour and mystical passion (*su álgebra y su fuego*) and was drawn to the notion underlying Cabala of an unknowable universe, a God whose ways must always remain beyond human understanding. Secondly, the Bible, from which certain key stories have been persistently reworked into his fiction: Creation, as the Word preceding the World; the Tower of Babel, illustrating the punishment for the search for knowledge; Cain and Abel, on rivalry and its murderous consequences; the arithmetical precision of the description in *Exodus* of the Tabernacle, its symmetry a reflection of divine perfec-

Alazraki, whose depth of insight remains unsurpassed and to the important work of Saúl Sosnowski and Edna Aizenberg; I too have written on this subject.<sup>3</sup> What I have to say here stands in direct dialogue with all the above. The thesis that I am seeking to establish concerns Borges' fictionalisation of these Judaic elements in a character-based study of some of his most relevant stories. It maintains that whilst there is, by definition, a unifying thread characterising the Jewish presence throughout Borges' work, the picture that emerges in the fiction is one of significant variety and complexity. I believe there is a dominant, but not an essentialized representation of the Jew and likewise, a dominant, but not an essentialized use of Jewish themes. I shall argue that Borges' interest in Judaism is twofold: one, centripetal and specific - this much is clear in that Borges writes about the particularity of Judaism, in stories firmly set in a Jewish context, be it historical, social or cultural. But it is also centrifugal and therefore less definable, in that Borges inserts the Jewish particularity into plots of universal concerns that ultimately transcend it. In this reading, Judaism is significant not so much in itself but as a particular metaphor or way of representing a more general theme.

Borges' philosemitism is not at issue here: his credentials in this respect must satisfy all but the most paranoid, but we cannot expect, nor would we wish to find, either a consistent portrayal or a finite one in a writer whose fiction's hallmark is to convey the complexity of the un-

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tion; Moses's exclusion from the Promised Land; metaphors from Ezequiel; the story of Job; and from the *New Testament*, Jesus, particularly as a Jewish preacher (I am thinking of "El Evangelio según Marcos", but there are other allusions) and, of course, Judas, repeatedly.

Thirdly, significant characteristics of Jewish history such as the Diaspora in its double aspect of geographical dispersal and cultural unification (through adherence to the Torah); the pogroms and their ultimate aberration, the Nazi atrocities; cultural persecution of the Jews (two stories are specifically set against this background, but its implications spill out to others); and, finally, a much idealised Israel.

Amongst writers, Spinoza deserves special mention; in his case as Heine's, the Jewish connection is repeatedly underlined. Kafka is not mentioned in the fiction, but his presence is strongly felt.

<sup>3</sup>Jaime Alazraki, "Kabbalistic Traits in Borges's Narration" and "Borges and the Kabbalah"; Saúl Sosnowski, *Borges y la cábala*; Edna Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic, and Judaic Elements in Borges*, to date the most comprehensive study of Borges' personal and cultural links with Judaism, "lo judío", to use her phrase. Evelyn Fishburn, "Borges, Cabbala and 'Creative Misreading'".

decipherable. But this, always with a fine sense of irony, a dimension that should never be ignored in any reading.

There is no monolithic portrayal of an essentialised Jew in Borges. Black Jews from Kochin, Irish Jews, and half-Jews break up the ethnic stereotype of the white, Caucasian Jew of central European descent and in his fiction one finds as many Jewish outlaws as peace-loving, book-loving intellectual Jews. Some have very minor roles, whereas others play the lead. Amongst the "leaders" certain characteristics are repeated: a clever mind, bookishness, victimisation and revenge, but not in a stereotyped portrayal.

For instance, the centrality of bookishness in Jewish culture is reflected in a number of Jewish characters depicted as intellectuals and/or experienced rationalists, but this characteristic is not accompanied by its usual associations. Some, are quasi saintly, like the joyous poet David Jerusalem, whilst others are steeped in crime like Scharlach, who uses his knowledge of Leusden's *Hebraeograecus* (wrongly, as it turns out, - the passage mentioned appears in the *Mixtus*) or Spinoza for villainous ends.

Arguably the most representative expression of Borges' Jewish imaginary can be found in "El milagro secreto", set in the culturally hybrid milieu of Prague. Its protagonist is the writer and intellectual Jaromir Hladík, one of Borges' most roundly sympathetic characters.

The story's undeniably explicit concern with the denunciation of the Nazi horror has been rightly signalled as a foremost thematic element, but the emotional pull of the subject and our inside knowledge of Borges' sympathies must not be allowed to occlude our reading to the wider issues addressed in it. My comments are not meant to establish a hierarchy between Jewish and universal issues but to highlight the way the story constantly undermines the solace of any positive interpretation. Whilst accepting - and admiring - the poetic inspiration of such readings, I resist the optimistic foregrounding of conclusions such as Barrenechea's (146: that the reader is left with the impression that the wish has been granted) or Aizenberg's (*The Aleph*, 126 and 129: that the story "celebrates" the Jewish mind and is "not a swan song but an affirmation of continued life")<sup>4</sup>. I cannot deny that in terms of "space"

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<sup>4</sup>This conclusion seems tempered in her article "Postmodern or Post-Auschwitz. Borges and the Limits of Representation", where "El milagro secreto" is said to exemplify the traits of Holocaust literature precisely because of its referentiality to the historic context.

the story appears to attach great significance to Hladík's positive inner experience, but I would argue that this is contradicted by the framework of the story, that is, by the impact of the stark realist opening and final sentence: "la cuádruple descarga lo derribó. Jaromir Hladík murió el veintinueve de marzo, a las nueve y dos minutos de la mañana" (OC 1: 513). It is tempting to foreground one "reality" over another, and argue that the miracle makes death irrelevant and vice versa. But to do so is to ignore the fundamental ironic undertones of the narrative. These are set out from the beginning and encapsulated in the title, "El milagro secreto". The paradox of the title is an indication of the tension existing between the miracle, a triumph of faith in God's existence and personal involvement ("*Para llevar a término ese drama, que puede justificarme y justificarte, requiero un año más*" (511), and its contradiction, suggested by the miracle's essential secrecy. No one other than Hladík is able to witness it which casts doubts about its validity. The interplay between these two realities is a continued feature of the story and towards the end, the drama of this duality is played out syntactically in a bi-partite sentence which best conveys the separateness of the two simultaneous realities: "Lo encontré; la gota de agua resbaló en su mejilla" (513). "Lo encontré" (the last word he needed to complete his life's work - subjective extasis); "la gota de agua resbaló en su mejilla" (the miracle year's correlative in chronological time, marking the objective onslaught of time and history).

If my reading sets the eternal against the temporal and the tribute to Jewish faith against the defeat of its outcome, it is to illustrate the centripetal - centrifugal metaphor used earlier. Further emphasis of the latter, the centrifugal tendency, may be found in the epigraph, which decontextualises the heavily Jewish element of the story by placing it beneath a quotation from the Koran concerning a similar miracle in the imaginary of Islam. There are several legends in different cultures, illustrating this same anecdote (about time stretched and condensed) and Borges used another in his first, 1944 edition, changing it for the 1956 OC publication. This fact is a mark of the importance he attached to the epigraph.

"Deutsches Requiem" is another story in which the Jewish concern has an internal and external function. In this story, the poet David Jerusalem embodies the Jewish experience of persecution, in that he is hounded to death (he commits suicide) because of his religious affiliation. The character's Jewishness is insisted upon not only by the double reference in his name, David and Jerusalem, but also by the informa-

tion that he looked Sephardi yet was Ashkenasi. I think that he represents not only all poets, as suggested in a footnote, but all Jews. And yet it is arguable that, paradoxically, the centre of gravity of the story may be seen to lie not with the German extermination of the Jewish people *per se*, but with the extermination of Christianity. David Jerusalem is persecuted at the outward level because he is different, an unassimilated Jew, but at a more profound level because he and his culture have been only too well assimilated, and become a visceral part of Germany ("el símbolo de una detestada zona de mi alma", OC 1: 579) gnawing at its strength. This story illustrates clearly and explicitly Borges' belief in the dominant influence of Judaism upon the whole of Western culture ("somos irremediablemente judíos"), particularly through its effect upon the Christian world. The joyousness with which Jerusalem sings every detail of the universe, his simplicity, his humility are felt to be threatening qualities by his Nazi Sub-Kommandant as manifestations of Christianity which clearly illustrates one of the aims of the story, this being to fictionalise the consequences of Nietzsche's revolt against Christianity as an enfeebled religion of comfort.

"Deutsches Requiem" is a mass in German but also a poignant mass for Germany. Behind the funereal lament for Judaism lies the lament for Germany itself, for a withering branch of its *forked* cultural history<sup>5</sup> The twin role that Judaism plays in this story of Nazi persecution is to represent centripetally its separateness from Germany and centrifugally its absorption into the main body of Germany's cultural history.

The stories examined so far include a thematic concern with victimization. In "Emma Zunz" the distinction between victim and vanquisher is blurred, making the two situations interchangeable. Also, both sides are Jewish. Emma Zunz, the eponymous heroine who premeditatedly murders her opponent, perceives herself as a victim and acts as an avenger of what is an evolving cause, first, her father's suicide; then, at the moment of intercourse, the realization of her mother's degradation, and ultimately, by extension, her own degradation. In the midst of this constant fluidity of motive there is one element which remains unperturbed, and that is Emma's plan and her execution of it. In Borgesian terms, her plan can be seen as a constant text serving different and even opposite meanings, an illustration of the *inconsistency* of form and content, the frictions of appearance and reality.

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<sup>5</sup>The English translation invites this pun on Zur Linde's maternal ancestry, the Forkels.

The story is placed almost entirely within the confines of the Jewish world of Buenos Aires around the year 1922 and includes scenes of embezzlement, prostitution, lies, betrayal and cold-blooded, premeditated murder, thus opening up the social and moral range of Borges' Jewish imaginary. Emma Zunz and Aarón Loewenthal, her male counterpart, both share a belief in a special relationship with God finding approval and inspiration in this faith for their (criminal) actions: they are pious criminals. The combination of piety and villainy exerted great fascination for Borges' imaginary and placing it within a strongly moralistic Jewish context has served to highlight its paradox.

In a conversation with Osvaldo Ferrari Borges dismisses Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" as a mere feminist tract, adding "como yo soy feminista, no requiero alegatos para convencerme" (232). Borges' feminism may be thought not to be in great evidence throughout his work, but it is worth pointing out that his only moderately developed character is female; also Jewish, manipulative and murderous; and uniquely pitiable.

The marked presence of Jewish criminality is an important component in the subtleties of Borges' imaginary. Another tale of murder and sacrificial revenge is "La muerte y la brújula". Red Scharlach, the mastermind of the murderous plan in this story is a degraded form of a hypostasized God: omniscient, confident and vengeful. Together with many other critics, I have considered elsewhere ("Borges and 'La muerte y la brújula'") the story's re-workings of its many Jewish allusions and so shall confine my remarks to the all-important mention of Baruch Spinoza (consistently referred to by the Jewish form of his first name). Edna Aizenberg, in her extensive and most learned handling of Spinozism in Borges interestingly sees the detective Erich Lönnrot as an illustration of Borges' sceptical questioning of Spinoza's systematic and rationally-based search for God. She writes: "Borges expresses his admiration [for Spinoza's intelligence] by making Lönnrot into a Spinoza figure." and further on, "Borges's Spinoza does not find Meaning, (...) pure logic confronts him with error and death" (*The Aleph* 137). These extrapolated quotations do not do full justice to Aizenberg's learned and insightful argument, but allow me to build on it and put forward a complementary reading to hers, based on the *success* of Spinozism.

Many critics have observed the mirrored images of Scharlach and Lönnrot, basing their assertions on the shared notion of Red in both surnames. There are more interesting ideas linking these two figures,

and one is their shared though contradictory link to Spinoza. Spinoza's proposition of a pantheistic universe was based upon two heretical ideas, the first, that God and nature are one, *Deus sive natura*, therefore that God partakes in all mankind and the second, that God is his own cause, *causa sua*: Worked fictionally into "La muerte y la brújula", and taking Scharlach as a (Pantheistic) manifestation of God, it becomes apparent that it is not Spinoza who has discovered the way to God independently from God, but God who has mischievously created and implanted the rational trap that will lead to His own discovery. In this reading Spinozism, inspired by God, succeeds in what it has set out to do, the solution of the mystery, only the consequences differ from the expected. Lönnrot has been successfully trapped to Scharlach's presence and death, reflecting ironically the fate of Spinoza, trapped *more geometrico* to God's presence, and excommunication. The repetition of such events is foreseen at the end of the story.

Another of Scharlach's victims is someone called Azevedo. This is a highly charged name in Borges' writings, being his family surname on his mother's side. It is often mentioned by Borges as a possible link to a Jewish ancestry. How is this link played out in Borges' fiction? It is, I think, the single most frequently used name for a character: in "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz", an Azevedo is mentioned as the owner of a herd of cattle, ("tropero"); in "El encuentro" as the owner of land and a house; in "La muerte y la brújula", his Jewishness emphasised by his forenames Daniel Simón, a local bully who moved from being "carrero" (wagon-driver) to "guapo electoral" (political tough) to "ladrón" (thief) and "delator" (informer). One Jewish villain, killing another, (the Hasidic scholar Yarmolinsky), betraying a third (Scharlach) and being killed for it.

In "El muerto" Azevedo Bandeira is said to be of mixed racial origin: "da (...) la injustificable impresión de ser contrahecho: en su rostro, siempre demasiado cercano, están el judío, el negro y el indio" (OC 1: 545). Here, he is the Scharlach figure who draws his opponent into his death-trap. The unquestioned superiority of his command makes him an outlaw effortlessly victorious in his revenge. To speculate on the motivations that led Borges to inscribe himself autobiographically in the Jewish imaginary of his fiction in this way lies beyond the confines of this study; suffice it to point out that Borges's maternal patronymic has served to enlarge the range of this imaginary through these particular fictional Azevedos.

Present interest in cultural studies and postcolonial theory have focused a great deal of attention on Borges' essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición" in which Borges puts forward the idea that Jews have played such an important role in their relationship to Western culture precisely because of their position of marginality, allowing them to act within that culture whilst not being tied to it "por una devoción especial" (OC 1: 272).

The many stories examined so far deal only tangentially with Judaism in an Argentine context, a topic linked to the question of national identity and allegiance which assumes some prominence in the collection *El informe de Brodie*.

I shall briefly look at three stories: "La Señora mayor", "Guayaquil" and "El indigno". The first is a sort of prequel to "Guayaquil": Jews are simply mentioned as part of an indifferentiated other. In "La Señora mayor", Judaism has no inherent or positive value but is seen by the main character, the daughter of a national hero, as part of a negative, antithetical force challenging established values, too horrible to contemplate: "Las palabras *protestante, judío, masón, hereje y ateo* eran, para ella, sinónimas y no querían decir nada." (OC 1: 272)

La Señora, embodiment of a vanishing patrician order, is defeated, ironically, by the excesses of the drummed up patriotism for which she is an excuse and dies from the excitement of the nationalist celebrations in her honour. Her male counterpart is the narrator of "Guayaquil": like her, he stands secure in his mind as the true representative of Argentine values and like her, he too is defeated. But his defeat comes not from within the old order but from the margins, from the seat of resistance and attack, that privileged space mentioned by Borges in "El escritor argentino y la tradición".

The victor, Zimerman, a brash, exiled Jewish historian, is a complex, largely unlikeable figure. His portrayal feeds directly into the stereotyped antisemitic prejudices so unselfconsciously held by the narrator whose identity, let me say it in passing, is perversely reminiscent of Borges'. The confrontation between the two historians is a subtle re-enactment of the famous meeting between San Martín and Bolívar which because of some newly found document is now to be re-interpreted. The choice of which historian is to do so lies between the firmly-rooted, national scholar of impeccable ancestry and repute or his newcomer opponent. As historians, they stand for different approaches, the former having an inborn and inbred understanding of events, the latter boasting the outsider's privileged objective perspec-



tive. For the first, history is seen as the continuation of an essential truth; for the second, history is always in the making, truth being fluid and alterable.

“—¿Usted es de Praga, doctor?”

“—Yo era de Praga.” (OC 2: 444)

The confrontation hinges on the use of the two tenses, the present suggesting timelessness whilst the imperfect implies temporal change. I shall translate the exchange to its unspoken subtext :

“—¿Usted es de Praga, doctor?”: You’re a foreigner, aren’t you, an outsider, not conversant with our ways?

“—Yo era de Praga.”: Once I was, but not any more. Now I belong to Argentina. My people are at home anywhere, and as an immigrant, and a Jew, I am the representative of the post-Roca liberal order, of a new, dynamic nation which only a mind as agile as mine can understand.

Brash, badly dressed, gauche, manipulative on the one hand, yet learned, and sensitive and forward looking, Zimmerman personifies in Borges’ imaginary the new spirit of Argentina. Of course the contest between the two historians can be read from a number of different perspectives. Another, based on the contenders’ shared philosophical interests would offer an interpretation played out in terms of a struggle of wills, reflecting the Schopenhauerian idea of the World as Will and Idea. A typically Borgesian ironic twist, given Schopenhauer’s “disbelief of history”, and particular antisemitism. (OC 2: 442; see too Katz 72-73)

The complexities of being Jewish and Argentinian forms the basis of “El indigno”, a story whose subtleties concerning this topic have largely been overlooked. At first glance it appears to be a fairly straightforward tale of betrayal: that of a Jewish youth accepting the protection of the local *compadrito* (tough guy) but who when asked to participate in a major robbery, takes fright and informs on the wanted ring-leader. The police hardly hide their scorn for the newcomer’s almost expected betrayal when they ask him whether he did what he did “porque te creés un buen ciudadano”(OC 2: 410): they take this to mean an orderly citizen with a vested interest in stability for the furtherance of industry. The fact that the incident is recounted many years later by the now commercially successful Santiago Fischbein, owner of a bookstore, supports this interpretation. Another reading would suggest that Fischbein betrayed Ferrari because he felt that he was losing his coveted position as Ferrari’s protégé when Don Eliseo, an elderly gaucho, resumed his place next to the leader. But to read in this vein is

to ignore the intra and intertextual complexities of the story. The theme of betrayal is an important one in Borges' fiction, and, as we have seen, is often linked to Jewish protagonists. Its most extensive treatment is in "Tres versiones de Judas", one version being that Judas was acting in the interests of Christ in betraying him as this would help his political cause, which needed a martyr. De Quincey's controversial words on the subject are quoted: "*No una cosa, todas las cosas que la tradición atribuye a Judas Iscariote son falsas*" (OC 1: 514). My suggestion is that in "El indigno", they continue to be false. "Lo esencial de la historia (...) es mi relación con Ferrari, no los sórdidos hechos" (OC 2: 409-410) proclaimed the narrator of the tale referring to his complete hero-worship of the man who had given him a sense of self-esteem and public worth. Carlyle's contention that men need heroes is recalled in this sordid, low-life setting: "Carlyle ha escrito que los hombres precisan héroes. La historia de Grosso me propuso el culto de San Martín, pero en él no hallé más que un militar que había guerreado en Chile (...). El azar me dio un héroe muy distinto, para desgracia de los dos: Francisco Ferrari." (OC 2: 407)

It should be recalled that early on in the story Fischbein denied knowing Ferrari out of modesty, because he felt that to lay claim to the friendship of such a hero would be boastful, a detail explaining the depth of his disillusion when the idol turned out to have feet of clay. (Having lost the local caudillo's support he was rounded up by the police the same as the rest of the gang). My contention is that the Jewish "disciple" felt the need to betray his unworthy god and make a martyr out of him to salvage the latter's reputation and his own dream: "Los diarios, por supuesto, lo convirtieron en el héroe que acaso nunca fue y que yo había soñado" (OC 2: 411).

According to this reading, "el Rusito" (Fischbein) is working not against the fading ethic of toughness and bravery as upheld by the urban gaucho but for it, in its favour, and like De Quincey's Judas, risking his own place in society as an ultimate sacrifice.

And now, in conclusion, the question that needs to be asked: is there a particular role ascribed to Jewishness in Borges' imaginary and if so, what is it? The range in the portrayal of Jewish characters in terms of culture, learning, occupation and even race, and the difference in their importance or status in individual stories makes this a difficult though not an impossible question to attempt to answer. Clearly, there are distinguishing characteristics, such as have been discussed above, and

some recurring themes of Jewish interest, and a convincing argument could be put forward as to the special place of Judaism in Borges.

Yet in another context, a similar case of privilege could be made, for example, about Irishness, or “the English”, Islam, India, Scandinavia, and so on. Borges’ work can usefully be compared to a kaleidoscope, its multiple elements acquiring greater or lesser significance according to the particular configuration of each reading. But that is not to say that the elements are not there, or are insignificant, just that they are fluid and relative, in accordance with Borges’ view of the universe, or our ability to come to terms with it.

Perhaps the question should be re-phrased to ask what was it in Borges’ imagination that made him state on so many occasions his wish to be Jewish? The answer may be found in what this paper has, I trust, amply illustrated, namely his fascination with the paradox of a people whose long history of dispersal and change has allowed them to play out their adherence to one Sacred Text in varied and unexpected ways thus escaping the straightjacket of the stereotype.

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