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Published in:
Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies

DOI:
[10.1163/2451859X-12340058](https://doi.org/10.1163/2451859X-12340058)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Roig Lanzillotta, F. (2018). Dialogue in the Library: Jorge Luis Borges's "The Circular Ruins" and His Re-reading of Gnostic Myths . *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, 3(2), 201-224.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/2451859X-12340058>

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Dialogue in the Library: Jorge Luis Borges's “The Circular Ruins” and His Re-reading of Gnostic Myths

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Abstract

Taking Jorge Luis Borges's short story “The Circular Ruins” as a starting point, the current article assesses the presence of gnostic ideas in the work of the Argentinian author. After pondering the context and sources for Borges's knowledge of gnosticism, and providing an overview of different Borgesian short stories that include gnostic motifs, it focuses on an analysis of several central notions in “The Circular Ruins.” A comparison between ancient and modern interpretations serves to evaluate the new meaning that gnostic motifs acquire in the literary framework created by the Argentinian writer. It concludes that Borges's reception and re-elaboration of gnostic thought helps him both to express some of his central philosophical preoccupations and to update these ancient myths, making them accessible for modern readers.

Keywords

Jorge Luis Borges – ancient gnosticism – reception of gnostic motifs – heresiologists – heresy – gnostic cosmogonies – golem – demiurge

1 Introduction

“The Circular Ruins” is perhaps one of the most memorable of the short stories by Jorge Luis Borges.¹ Its style, structure, and theme; its symbolic load; the

1 For Borges, too, the story occupied a special place in his memory. See Barrenechea 1965, 5, 149. See in that regard Shaw 1976.

peripeteia or “sudden change” at the end of the story; and, above all, the catharsis or “purification” through fear—the fear of the insignificance of human existence—which facilitates the identification of the reader with the main character, grant this narrative a very special place among Borgesian stories.²

As happens to every great work, specialists have interpreted “The Circular Ruins” from multiple angles. For Carmen Rabell, Guillermo Arango, or Geoffrey Green, for example, the story is a metaphor of artistic creation.³ Others, based on post-modernist views derived from stories like “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” see in “The Circular Ruins” a deconstructivist manifesto about the death of the author, who, they claim, disintegrates before our eyes in the same way the dreamer does at the end of the story.⁴ Still others have found in the text a challenge to the social construction of personality or even of the category of gender.⁵ And some, finally, have pointed out that we are facing a re-elaboration of the golem legend.⁶ In point of fact, the artist Jules Kirschenbaum refers to “The Circular Ruins” as a source of inspiration for his work in the commentary to his painting *Dream of a Golem*, hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁷

In the following pages I would like to explore “The Circular Ruins” with a view to attempting an organic interpretation of the story, one which both explores other possible interpretations and integrates them into the wider framework of Borges’s oeuvre. With this goal in mind, I will take as a starting point the echo of gnostic cosmogonies in his writings, the poetic power of which Borges so frequently exploits. It is well known that Borges conceives of metaphysics and theology as branches of fantastic literature.⁸ According to Evelyn Fishburn, far

2 See, for both notions, Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450a 32; 1452a 22–1452b3 (*peripeteia*); 1449b21–28 (*catharsis*).

3 Rabell 1988, 95–104; Arango 1973, 249–54; Green 1990, 200–13.

4 O’Sullivan 1990, 120: “At this juncture, the author vanishes like the disintegrating dreamer dispersed into the increasing materiality of his own phantasm in Borges’s ‘The Circular Ruins.’”; Soud 1995, 740.

5 Butler, 1990, 7–13.

6 See, for example, Rodríguez Monegal 1978, 137; Alazraki 1988, 20.

7 Kirchenbaum 1990, 244–245. See, in that regard, Aizenberg 1990, 12–14.

8 The most famous mention, in which Borges elaborates on the idea of the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger, *Philosophie des als ob* (1922), appears in Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” part II: “The fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des als ob*, has caused them to multiply. There is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type. The metaphysicians of Tlön do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature. They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one such aspect” (Borges 1999, 75). See also “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language,” in *Other Inquisitions*: “there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and

from being derogatory, Borges's position actually emphasizes his appreciation for theology (and philosophy) as an endless source of literary metaphors.⁹ Be that as it may, his works indeed show an abundance of references to religion in general and to diverse beliefs in particular. Among the latter, Judaism and Christianity occupy a special place. Borges in general shows a proper knowledge of the religions he discusses, although we should not expect an "objective" exposition or a scientific approach to their various dogmas from him. On the contrary, his skeptical tone and attitude, together with his distrust of all orthodoxy, often leads him to a characteristic approach to religion that has been described as "subversive and counter-cultural."¹⁰

As might be expected, therefore, heresy as a topic occupies a preferential position in Borges's works. As Ted Lyon and Pjers Hangrow rightly point out, during a creative period of forty years—from the early 1930s, when he wrote "Circular Time," to the early 1970s, when he wrote "The Congress"—heresy, heresiology, and heresiarchs are central topics that appear recurrently in his stories.¹¹ Hence his predilection for gnosticism, the heresy *par excellence* according to Borges, as well as for kabbalah.¹²

2 The Context: Gnosticism in Borges

Indeed we should not forget that Borges's view of gnosticism proceeds to a large extent from the reports of heresiological writers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, or Hippolytus. Today we no longer regard ancient gnosis, in general, as a heresy, either Jewish or Christian, but rather as an innovative form of spirituality, as a religious attitude, ostensibly countercultural and transgressive but *sui generis* and independent.¹³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, when

conjunctural. The reason is very simple: we do not know what the universe is" (Borges 1973, trans. Simms, 104).

9 Fishburn 2013, 56: "His often quoted opinion that he considered theology and religion branches of the literature of the fantastic is usually taken as a witty quip, dismissive of them both, but this overlooks the value that Borges places on the literature of the fantastic. What he ridicules is not religious thought *per se* but its claims to universal truth, yet what he is implicitly, though indirectly, praising is its special value as a source of literary metaphors."

10 Fishburn 2015, 98.

11 Lyon and Hangrow 1974, 23.

12 See Aizenberg 1986 or Alazraki 1988.

13 See, on gnostic spirituality DeConick 2013a, 285–305; DeConick, 2013b, 148–84; DeConick 2016, 1–18. For gnosticism as a religious attitude, see Van den Broek 2013, 1–12; counter-cultural, see DeConick and Roig Lanzillotta 2016.

Borges began to write his poetry and short stories, things looked quite different: in the wake of the church fathers, gnosticism was conceived of as a deviation or deformation of standard Christian or Jewish views and ideas.

In my analysis of gnostic notions in Borges's works, consequently, I will start from the meaning that these sources give to them. This does not mean, however, that a more nuanced and serious analysis of ancient gnosticism in the context of Borges is not necessary. Studies about Borges's use of gnosticism sometimes tend to ignore the obvious distortion introduced by the church fathers, and so affirm that the new sources confirm the biased reports of the church fathers;¹⁴ still other studies seem to rely on analyses that transmit outdated views of ancient gnosticism;¹⁵ yet others, finally, introduce serious errors in their analyses.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, numerous studies in the wake of the Nag Hammadi discovery have enabled the academic community to revise many of the approaches taken by the church fathers—the fresh air of these studies, however, has not yet fully transcended the walls of academia.

Long before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in 1945, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a great rise in interest in ancient gnosticism.¹⁷ Indeed, the publication of important studies at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, along with the foundation of the Theosophical Society by Helena Blavatsky in 1875, and the *Église gnostique de France* by Jules Doineau in 1890, are likely to have been behind the increase in public interest in gnosticism. Most importantly, in 1916, Carl Gustav Jung—who later would play such an important role in the publication of the codices—published his *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, the subtitle of which apocryphally attributes its authorship to Basilides himself.¹⁸ It is in this context that the interest in gnosticism by the young Borges needs to be situated.

2.1 *The Inspiration*

Around 1932 Borges published *Discusión*, a collection of short stories that included “A Defense of Basilides the False,” a tale that he had published first in the newspaper *La Prensa* (January 1, 1932) under the title “A Defense of the

14 See *contra* Lona 2006, 127n4.

15 Such as the repetition, without qualification, of views held by Hans Jonas or Kurt Rudolph.

16 See, for example, Riveros Álvarez 2011, 67, who describes the Apocryphon of John as a “Valentinian work.”

17 On the discovery of Nag Hammadi in general, see Robinson 2014.

18 On Jung and the Jung Foundation's contribution to the publication of the Nag Hammadi Codex I, the so-called “Jung Codex,” see Robinson 2014, 351–485.

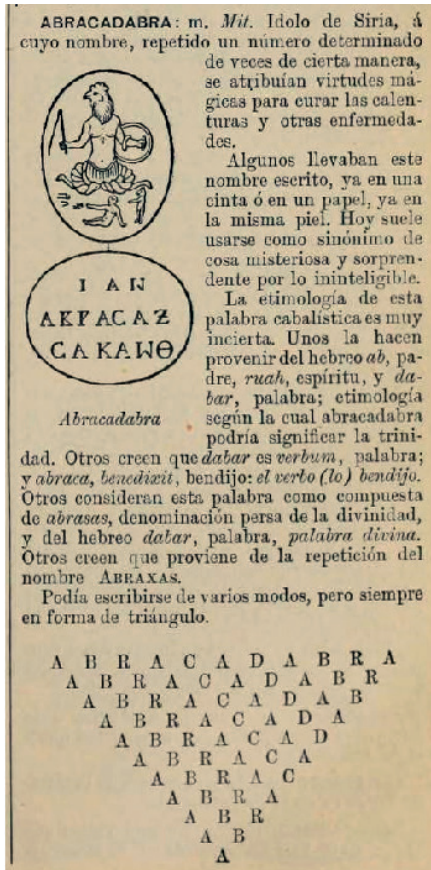


FIGURE 1
 Drawing that the young Borges probably saw in Montaner and Simón's *Hispano-American Encyclopedic Dictionary*.

Gnostics.”¹⁹ In this story Borges fictionalizes the origin of his interest in gnosticism, carefully (literarily?) reconstructing the steps backwards to his early youth. According to this narrative, around 1905, six-year-old Borges had already admired a strange figure included in Montaner and Simón's *Hispano-American Encyclopedic Dictionary*: “a small and alarming drawing of a sort of king, with the profiled head of a rooster, a virile torso with open arms brandishing a shield and a whip, and the rest merely a coiled tail, which served as a throne”²⁰ (see Figure 1).

19 Borges 1974 [1932], 213–216, “Una vindicación del falso Basilides [A Defense of Basilides the False].” First published as “Una vindicación de los gnósticos [A Defense of the Gnostics]” in *La Prensa*, Jan. 1, 1932.

20 Lona 2006, 126n2. Borges is probably referring to the figure included on page 158, entry “Abracadabra” (See Figure 1), of the first volume 1 (1887) of the *Diccionario Enciclopédico Hispano-Americano de Literatura, Ciencias y Artes, Edición profusamente ilustrada con*

Some years later, around 1916, an “obscure” and enigmatic reference in Francisco de Quevedo’s *Las zahúrdas de Plutón* triggered Borges’s teenage imagination: “There was the accursed Basilides the heresiarch. There was Nicholas of Antioch, Carpocrates and Cerinthus and the infamous Ebion. Later came Valentinus, he who believed sea and silence to be the beginning of everything.”²¹ A third step came in 1923, when the adult Borges made his first contact with gnosticism thanks to “some heresiological book in German (no sé qué libro heresiológico en alemán),” the knowledge of which he would later enhance by consulting the German translation of G.R.S. Mead’s, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Gnostics*, and the works of Wolfgang Schulz, Wilhelm Bousset, and Adolf Hilgenfeld.²²

Studies on Borges blindly follow this fictionalized description of his gradual acquaintance with gnosticism as if it were biographical. The stereotypical tenor of the story makes this interpretation rather improbable: the child Borges, voraciously reading encyclopedia articles, passively gets his first knowledge of gnosticism from an image included in one of its volumes; the teenager Borges more actively but still involuntarily widens this knowledge thanks to his voracious reading; finally the adult both actively and voluntarily investigates the origins of this religious movement. In my view this description is much too ideal and literary to be truly biographical, all the more since every reader of Borges knows his tendency to fictionalize or present his life in a literary way. In my view therefore, his interest in gnosticism should be explained against the background of the wide and growing interest in the movement we see in the first decades of the twentieth century.

2.2 *Heresy in Borges*

Be that as it may, the scholarly studies on gnosticism that Borges claims to have read as an adult seem to have reinforced the view the teenaged Borges found in Quevedo, who, according to the homonymous short story, “reviles the Gnostics as infamous, accursed, mad, and says they are inventors of nonsense.”²³ Consequently, it should come as no surprise that Borges’s concept of gnosticism was heavily influenced by the widespread view of the church fathers, who also

miles de pequeños grabados intercalados en el texto y tirados aparte, ed. Montaner y Simón (Barcelona, 1887–1899). See the English translation quoted above in Borges 1999a, by Allen, Levine, and Weinberger, 65–68.

21 Lona (2006, 126n2), quoting F. de Quevedo (1699, 307–331 and 329–330), “Estaba el maldito Basilides heresiarca. Estaba Nicolás antioqueno, Carpócrates y Cerinthus y el infame Ebión. Vino luego Valantino, el que dio por principio de todo, el mar y el silencio.”

22 See Mead 1990 [1902]; Schulz 1910; Bousset 1912a; 1912b; Hilgenfeld 1884.

23 Borges 1973, trans. Simms, 37.

influenced the view of Adolf von Harnack, for whom gnosticism was an "acute Hellenization of Christianity," or that of the history of religions school, which saw it as an "orientalization" of Christianity. In both of these cases gnosticism is conceived of as a perversion, derivation, or transformation of a Christian doctrine.²⁴ In point of fact, the sources Borges consulted transmitted a vision of gnosticism as the heresy *par excellence*. This notwithstanding, or precisely because of this according to the scholarly opinion mentioned above, Borges's interest in gnosticism would only increase as time passed.²⁵ Indeed the work of both Ted Lyon and Pjers Hangrow, along with that of Evelyn Fishburn, affirm that Borges's countercultural penchant might explain his predilection for gnosticism.²⁶

2.3 "Borgesian Motifs" in Ancient Gnosticism

In my view, however, more important than Borges's alleged tendency towards (or interest in) heresy in general is the character of the "heresy" in question. Borges's predilection for gnosticism is, in point of fact, better understood when one notes that the corpus of texts classified by his heresiological sources as "gnostic" abound in "Borgesian motifs," with a nod to Borges himself.²⁷ The interest in primordial origins and cosmogonies, the concern for cosmological matters, the notion of the transcendent God, the demiurge and his creation, the problem of theodicy, the insignificance of human existence, and the view of life as a dream or daydream are all, at one and the same time, gnostic and Borgesian motifs.

In addition to the already mentioned "A Defense of Basilides the False," scholars have identified a large number of stories whose narrative allegedly develops around clear gnostic elements. "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv," "The Theologians," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "The Circular Ruins," "The Immortal," "Three Versions of Judas," "The House of Asterion," and even "Brodie's Report" have all been asserted as including clearly gnostic motifs and have received due scholarly attention in that regard.²⁸ However, if we add to

24 See, on this issue, King 2003.

25 See above notes 11 and 12.

26 See above note 11.

27 See Borges, "Pierre Menard author of the *Quixote*," in *Ficciones* (1944); "Kafka and His Precursors," in *Other Inquisitions* (1952).

28 "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv," see Lona 2006, 130–37. "The Theologians," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," see Lona 2006, 137–150. "The Circular Ruins," see Riveros Álvarez 2011, 67. "The Immortal," see Ayora 1973, 593–96. "Three Versions of Judas," see Williams 2015, 138–50. "The House of Asterion," see Anderson Imbert 1960, 42 (Alazraki 1987, 135–43). "Brodie's Report," see Riveros Álvarez 2011, 84–85.

these stories those including more or less veiled allusions or references both to gnostic and kabbalistic ideas, and to other ideas not necessarily gnostic but also relevant to both corpora, the list can be extended still more. Even if not systematically dealt with by the scholarly literature, non-fiction stories like “John Wilkins’s Analytical Language,” “The First Wells,” or “Quevedo,” in *Other Inquisitions*, or poems like “The Golem,” or “Chess,” just to mention a few, can also be included in this list.²⁹

3 The Text: Gnosticism in “The Circular Ruins”

“The Circular Ruins” was first published in the Argentinian journal *Sur*.³⁰ It was included in the 1941 collection *The Garden of Forking Paths* and later in the 1944 *Fictions*. As Borges’s narrative begins, the protagonist, significantly described as a “magician,” arrives at the ruins of a circular temple crowned by a stone tiger or horse. He harbors the secret desire of dreaming up a man and imposing him on reality. After some failed attempts, he succeeds in dreaming a complete man, even though in the way of old legends this creature is unable to move. Conceding to the prayers of the magician, Fire, the god who inhabits the circular temple, agrees to animate the creature, provided that the magician will send him to another temple downstream so that the creature will carry out, from then on, the rites owed to the god: Fire himself and the dreamer will share the secret. The magician keeps his word; one day, however, some rowers tell him about a man inhabiting a temple downstream capable of walking “on fire and not be burned.”³¹ Troubled by the fact that his creation, “his son,” may have discovered the truth, the magician does not notice the fire, which, while nearing the temple in a concentric manner, has finally surrounded him. “With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him.”³²

As I said before, “The Circular Ruins” is usually considered a retelling of the legend of the Golem.³³ However, the dramatic beginning of the narrative, describing in an almost cinematographic manner the arrival of the man from

29 While the short stories mentioned above are extensively dealt with in the scholarly literature, this is not the case with the other fiction and non-fiction stories or poems that include more veiled references. A proper study of Gnosticism in Borges should also take into account this important material.

30 75, Dec. 1940.

31 Borges 1999b, 100.

32 Borges 1999b, 100.

33 Add to the above references Aizenberg 1986, 97.

the south, shows, I think, that the intention of the story transcends that of the medieval legend:

No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe as it sank into the sacred mud, and yet within days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man had come there from the South, and that his homeland was one of those infinite villages that lie up-river, on the violent flank of the mountain, where the language of the Zend is uncontaminated by Greek and where leprosy is uncommon. But in fact the gray man had kissed the mud, scrambled up the steep bank (without pushing back, probably without even feeling, the sharp-leaved bulrushes that slashed his flesh), and dragged himself, faint and bloody, to the circular enclosure, crowned by the stone figure of a horse or tiger, which had once been the color of fire but was now the color of ashes.³⁴

The assertion that nobody had noticed him, emphasized by means of the triple repetition of the pronoun "no one," and, as has been pointed out, the adjective "unanimous," or "single-souled," that is applied to the night, already seems to present reality as existing in one mind.³⁵ This mind could be the mind of the dreamer who dreams up our magician, although the reader will only know this at the end of the story.³⁶ This possibility—together with the notion of circularity, which is the central theme in the story and is suggested by different means—expands the spectral nature of the magician, insinuating the possibility of an infinite regression, while pointing by the same token to the futility of existence, of individuality, and of creation.³⁷ It seems, consequently, that the story deals with the implications and the philosophical background of the very act of creating.

This futility of man's existence, however, strongly contrasts with the clear determination of the protagonist. The second paragraph, in point of fact, enunciates without further ado his creative intentions:

The goal that led him on was not impossible, though it was clearly supernatural: He wanted to dream a man. He wanted to dream him completely, in painstaking detail, and impose him upon reality. This magical

34 Borges 1999b, trans. Hurley, 96.

35 First mentioned by Irby and Alazraki, as quoted by Shaw 1976, 26.

36 Irby 1972.

37 Shaw (1976, 26) mentions, in addition to the title including the term "circular," the "recinto circular," and the "redondel" to refer to the temple's circularity, the cyclical destruction of the temple by previous fires, etc., "as a symbol both of endless futility and of universal oneness."

objective had come to fill his entire soul; if someone had asked him his own name, or inquired into any feature of his life till then, he would not have been able to answer.³⁸

At first sight, this part of the story might seem to focus on the creation of the Golem.³⁹ And this would be no surprise, since Borges was particularly attracted to the legend and dealt with it on several occasions.⁴⁰ In any case, the author dedicated a poem to the motif, “The Golem,” which he affirms was inspired by the work of Gustav Meyrink, *Der Golem* (1915), the first book that Borges read in German.⁴¹ But if Meyrink’s bestseller centers on the figure of Athanasius Pernath, it only peripherally focuses on the medieval legend.⁴² Admittedly, the hallucinatory ambiance of the story abounds in motifs dear to Borges, such as wakefulness, sleeping, dreaming, labyrinthine structure, and the idea of the double. Nonetheless, we should not discard the possibility that, during his travels in Europe, Borges attended the cinematographic version of one of the three releases of the films of Paul Wegener (1915/1917/1920), *Der Golem: wie er in die Welt kam* (see Figure 2), since, even if also inspired by Meyrink, in the movie the Golem is the main focus.⁴³ Both the movie and the book develop the *doppelgänger* motif so dear to Borges.⁴⁴

However, two issues make interpreting “The Circular Ruins” by way of the Golem motif problematic. In the first place, the nature of the magician’s creation

38 Borges 1999b, trans. Hurley, 97.

39 On the issue, see Boldy 2009, 89. On the Golem motif in general, see Scholem 1965; Idel 1990. See Baer 2012.

40 Besides the poem “The Golem” Borges deals with the legend in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* and in “La Cábala,” *Siete Noches*. See, for other references, Borges 2010, ed. Costa Picazo, 2:539–40.

41 Borges, “The Golem,” in *The Self and The Other* (1964; trans. John Hollander 1972). According to Costa Picazo 2010, 2:538–39, the poem was first published in *Davar*, July–August 1958; later in “Otras composiciones,” in *Poemas 1923–1953* (1954), and finally in *El otro, el mismo* (1964). See Borges, “An autobiographical Essay,” in Di Giovanni, ed., 1970, where Borges confirms that Meyrink’s text was the first book he read in German. See also Soud 1995, 742. As Baer (2012, 30) points out, the legend received widespread attention thanks to Meyrink’s work, who published it first in *Die Weissen Blätter* during the period 1913–1914. It was finally published in book form in 2015.

42 Indeed as Baer 2012, 30, rightly remarks, “*The Golem* seems almost a misnomer for this first popular retelling. Despite its reputation as the ur-text for subsequent golem fiction, the novel focuses very little on the clay man”.

43 According to Baer (2012, 36–46 at 36), even if critics normally consider that Meyrink influenced Wegener, the situation might be more complex. Indeed it is plausible to think that the former was influenced first by Wegener’s *Der Student von Prag* 1913, while writing his *Der Golem*, and that Meyrink’s book then, in turn, influenced Wegener’s *Der Golem*.

44 Rodríguez Monegal 1978, 136–37; Soud 1995, 742.

is rather different than that of the Golem. The magician's goal, admittedly, is still to impose his creation upon reality. However, far from being formed in the traditional manner out of raw materials such as dust or clay, the creature is of a much more tenuous nature, namely that of dreams. And this means, to begin with, that the magician's intention is even more supernatural than in the traditional Golem legend, since it implies a transition from immaterial to material entities. Furthermore, the process of creation here is even more intimate than the one mediating between sculptor and sculpture, as in the medieval legend. And in this regard, it is, I think, significant that the magician considers the creation "his son."⁴⁵

The second (and most important) obstacle in accepting an interpretation of "The Circular Ruins" as a remake of the Golem motif is that Borges himself disproves this elucidation in the prologue of *The Self and the Other*. He states that while his poem "The Golem" obviously deals with the legend, "The Circular Ruins" explores the relationship of mankind and divinity, and maybe that of the poet with his works.⁴⁶ In my opinion, to achieve a sound interpretation of the story, we must note the fact that both the Golem legend and the gnostic cosmogonies mentioned in the story are in fact variations on the theme of creation in the book of Genesis. These variations allow Borges to display before our eyes both the implicit problems and the consequences of creation in a technomorphic kind of cosmogony. Unlike biomorphic cosmogonies, which narrate the appearance of the cosmos as a natural process, technomorphic ones—such as in Plato's *Timaeus* referred to above, or Genesis—attribute the generation of the world to the works of a creator god who either gives form to chaotic, pre-existent matter, or generates it out of nothing, the so-called *creatio ex nihilo*.

Gnostic cosmogonies—or rather anthropogonies, since all of these stories actually gravitate towards the appearance of human beings, which the cosmos

45 Ancient cosmogonies, in the wake of Plato's *Timaeus*, also distinguish two aspects (or moments) in the creative activity of god: one of them is more intimate, since god shares his essence with his first creation, which is described as his son or daughter, transmitting to it his intelligibility. Ancient texts describe this act as "generation" (and god as father) and distinguish it from "creation" proper, in which we see a more detached mode of creation, since god gives form to chaotic primeval matter, in a way similar to the way that the sculptor does with the sculpture.

46 See Borges, *The Self and the Other*, prologue: "In Lubbock, on the edge of the desert, a tall girl asked me whether, when I wrote *El Golem*, I had not attempted a variation on *Las ruinas circulares* [The circular ruins]; I replied that I had had to cross the whole continent to receive this revelation, which was true. Both compositions, in fact, have their differences; the dreamt dreamer is in one, the relationship of divinity with man and perhaps the one of the poet with his work, in the one I wrote afterwards," (1972).



FIGURE 2
Poster of Wegener's
Der Golem (1920)

is but a reflection of—dramatized that central moment in the activity of every creator-god: the generation of human beings. The variety of views regarding the cosmos that we find in the Nag Hammadi treatises has helped scholars to nuance the biased exposition of the church fathers regarding the alleged gnostic low esteem both for the world and the physical body. But according to the heresiologists—whose view Borges follows—the depreciation of the body and the world led gnostics to conceive of humans as a product of the vanity of a secondary, subordinate divinity, and the world as the dungeon in which to imprison them. This demiurge not only ignored the fact that he, in turn, was himself the creature of a superior god, but also that his creation was but a pale reflection of the fullness of the pleroma, and formed out of derivative matter.

Consequently the gnostic reinterpretation of Genesis—reinterpreted, in turn, by the church fathers who provide him with the information—allows Borges to explore a series of motifs very dear to him: (1) the story within the story, (2) God or the first principle, (3) the subordinate creator or demiurge, (4) the visible world as a reflection of the divine or ideal model, and (5) the nothingness of human existence. In what follows, I will analyze Borges's narrative vis-à-vis these elements.

3.1 *The Story within the Story*

First, the creator-creature relationship allows the author to develop the motif of the story within the story, the duplication of realities that we know well from his other stories. This is, for example, the case of "On Exactitude of Science" with which Jean Baudrillard begins his *Simulacra and Simulation*, and also that of "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*," which focuses on Cervantes's story of Maese Pere's tableau, to which the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) also dedicated some memorable pages.⁴⁷ If the fact that the map is included within the map unsettles us, or the "Thousand and One Nights inside the Thousand and One Nights," this is, according to Borges, because "these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional world can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious."⁴⁸

The subject is certainly not new. At the dawn of Western literature, a verse by Pindar reflects the view that "man is a dream of a shadow" (*skias onar anthropos*).⁴⁹ In the sphere of Hispanic literature, *Life Is a Dream* by Calderón de Barca and *Mist* by Miguel de Unamuno are the most visible precedents.⁵⁰ However, in all these cases the shadowy nature of our existence is counteracted by God's existence, who, as in George Berkeley's philosophy (the *esse est percipi* so dear to Borges), vouchsafes everything existent, serving in this way to maintain appearances, to sustain our being, conferring stability to our lives, and dissipating the burning question regarding the reality of our existence. As we will have occasion to see, Borges cannot resort to this solution, and this

47 "On Exactitude of Science," in *The Maker*. According to Costa Picazo (2010, 2:401), this short text was first published in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* 1(3), March 1946, under the pseudonym B. Lynch Davis. The story was later published in *Historia Universal de la infamia* (1954), and then removed from this collection, and finally included in *The Maker* (1960). Other references to story within story: J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1; Borges, "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*," 1973, 43–46; Ortega y Gasset 1981, *Meditaciones del Quijote* "Meditación primera", 9.

48 Borges 1973, trans. Simms, "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*." See also Fishburn 2004, 35–42.

49 Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 8.94.

50 Shaw 1976, 26.

confers on “The Circular Ruins” a deeper dimension that will help us to better appreciate his adaptation of gnostic motifs.

3.2 *God or the First Principle*

Second, the dramatization of the activity of the gnostic demiurge allows Borges to address another central topic in his work, namely the notion of God or the first principle. Lyon and Hangrow noted that, while Borges often refers to God and the divine, he usually does not specify which type of divinity he is actually referring to.⁵¹ Besides the fact that Borges's texts often simply state the existence of a “divine presence,” in most cases this divine presence fades away in a regression that seems to deprive it of any meaning. This idea is well expressed by the last verses of his poem “Chess”:

God moves the player, he in turn the piece.
But what god beyond God begins the round
of dust and time and sleep and agonies?⁵²

The transcendent divinity of gnosticism, the distant God beyond words and descriptions, beyond mundane worries, engaged, like the Epicurean gods, in his divine idleness, seems to suit the Borgesian concept of God best. As he asserts in “The First Wells” from *Other Inquisitions*, God is far beyond the daily activities of the world. Indeed, we would “distrust the intelligence of a God who maintained heavens and hells. God, Spinoza has written, does not hate anyone and does not love anyone (Ethics 5,17).”⁵³ It is therefore no surprise that the young Borges of *Fervor of Buenos Aires* already admires the “the God of the mystics, / whom they insist has no attributes.”⁵⁴ This is, if possible, even more the case with the gnostic transcendent God. As “A Defense of Basilides the False” points out:

In the beginning of Basilides' cosmogony there is a God. This divinity majestically lacks a name, as well as an origin; thus his approximate name, pater innatus. His medium is the pleroma or plenitude, the inconceivable museum of Platonic archetypes, intelligible essences, and universals. He is an immutable God, but from his repose emanated seven subordinate

51 Lyon and Hangrow 1974, 24.

52 Borges, “Chess,” first published in *The Maker* (1960), trans. Coleman in Borges 1999c, 103.

53 Borges 1973, trans. Simms, “The First Wells,” *Otras inquisiciones* (1952), 86–88.

54 Borges 1972, trans. Merwin in Di Giovanni, ed., 19 “Remordimiento por cualquier muerte” (“Remorse for any Death”), in *Fervor of Buenos Aires*, “Como el Dios de los místicos / de quien deben negarse todos los predicados,”

divinities who, condescending to action, created and presided over a first heaven.⁵⁵

3.3 *The Demiurge*

By means of this text we arrive at the third motif of the story, the entity responsible for the creation of the visible world. From the seven subordinate divinities mentioned in "A Defense of Basilides," Borges focuses on their visible head, the demiurge, or the creator of humankind and the cosmos. Concerning his features, Borges emphasizes—as I stated previously—his vanity, but in addition to that, his ignorance and especially his incompetence. While in the report by Irenaeus, known to Borges, the demiurge's ignorance simply exonerates him from any responsibility for the creative process; the topos serves different purposes in various ancient gnostic texts. In some cases, it emphasizes the demiurge's foolishness.⁵⁶ In others, it underlines his arrogance.⁵⁷ For Borges the demiurge's ignorance results in incompetence, and both traits offer an explanation for theodicy, for the existence of evil in this world. Indeed, in a paraphrase of David Hume in the story "John Wilkins' Analytical Language," Borges considers that the world is perhaps "only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors; it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity, and ever since his death has run on."⁵⁸

It is at this point we see that, despite the interest the legend of the Golem may have evoked in him, Borges in "The Circular Ruins" was even more interested in a central aspect of the narration of Genesis, which had also been the focus of gnostic mythopoeists: the contradictory and ambiguous character of a creator figure incapable of managing his work. Unlike some gnostic cosmogonies, however, Borges does not scorn the demiurge's incapacity to create. If the superior and transcendent God inspires admiration in him, the demiurge evokes in him more pity than derision. In this context, Thomas Browne's vision, much quoted by Borges, "that this visible world is but a picture of the invisible, wherein, as in a portrait, things are not truly [sic], but in equivocal shapes," is more intense.⁵⁹

55 Borges 1999a, trans. Weinberger, "A Defense of Basilides the False," 65–66.

56 See, e.g., Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.33.1; Gos. Phil. NHC II,3 55.14–19.

57 See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.6 (Ofites); Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Ref.* 7.23.3 (Basilides); Nat. Rulers NHC II,4 94.21–28; Orig. World NHC II,5 103.6–11.

58 Borges 1999a, trans. Weinberger. "John Wilkins' Analytical Language," 232 in reference to D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* v.

59 Thomas Browne, *De religio medicis* (1642), as quoted by Lemm 1991, 70.

3.4 *The World*

The world is the fourth motif worth emphasizing in “The Circular Ruins.” Borges follows the notion of Aristotelian origin, which is also present in the Chaldean Oracles and gnostic texts, according to which the level of divinity of creation decreases as we are removed from the divine region and approach the earth. That is also the case with “A Defense of Basilides”:

From this first demiurgic crown came a second, also with angels, powers, and thrones, and these formed another, lower heaven, which was the symmetrical duplicate of the first. This second conclave saw itself reproduced in a third, and that in another below, and so on down to 365. The lord of the lowest heaven is the God of the Scriptures, and his fraction of divinity is nearly zero.⁶⁰

The divinity of the world we live in is also nearly zero. As Borges affirms at the outset of “Three Versions of Judas,” “Basilides proclaimed that the cosmos was a reckless or maleficent improvisation by angels lacking in perfection.”⁶¹ We have already seen this idea showing up in “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language.” Of course, the imperfection of the world and the existence of evil in it make theodicy or divine justice the central theme of every religion that encompasses the notion of an omnipotent and benign divinity.⁶² In “La cábala,” where he deals at length with this issue, Borges rejects Leibniz’s idea that evil is necessary in this world.⁶³ Gnostic cosmogony, in a different way, has the virtue of accounting for the existence of evil in the world without compromising divine equanimity. By creating the figure of an inferior god, incapable and unable, the transcendent God is exonerated from all responsibility for a creation that does not belong to him. According to Borges, consequently, the gnostic view is not:

... a museum piece from the history of philosophy. I believe the system has an application: it can serve as a means of thinking, of trying to understand the universe ...). Why did He (scil. God) create this world so full of errors, so full of horror, so full of sins, so full of physical pain, so full of guilt, so full of crime? Because the Divinity had diminished itself until it reached Jehovah, who created this fallible world.⁶⁴

60 Borges 1999a, trans. Weinberger, “A Defense of Basilides the False,” 66.

61 Borges 1999b, 163.

62 See Borges in “El Hogar,” February 1938, with Lemm 1991, 71.

63 See Borges, “La Cábala,” in *Siete Noches* (1980) (*Seven Nights*, Translated by Weinberger, in Borges 1984). For the theory by Leibniz, see his *Theodicy* (1734).

64 Borges, “The Kabbalah,” trans. Weinberger 1984, 76–84 at 81.

In "The Circular Ruins," the approach is somewhat different. In the same way that the superposition of the 365 skies of Basilides's system separate us from the pleroma, depriving us of our improbable divinity, the dream within the dream sets us before a vertiginous infinite regression that confronts us with our own insignificance. In his poem "Sunrise," also found in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, a young Borges already mentions "the tremendous conjecture of Schopenhauer and Berkeley which declares the world an activity of the mind, a dream of souls, without foundation or purpose or volume."⁶⁵ The gnostic view of the cosmos therefore appears to provide Borges with a suitable myth to express his own concept of the world, a view that accompanied him throughout his whole life, from his early pages of *Fervor*, through those of adulthood in *Other Inquisitions*, to that of "La cábala" in *Seven Nights*.

3.5 *Humankind*

It is time to address the fifth and central motif of the story, humankind. Borges concept of the first God, and his view of the subaltern demiurge and his creation, has of course an impact on his view of human beings. In "The Circular Ruins" there are no guilty parties: being also the creation of another dreamer, the demiurge is as much a victim as his creation. The end of the story is clear about this: the sheets of flame "did not bite his flesh, they caressed him and flooded him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him."⁶⁶ As the last link in this chain of dreamers, the human being's situation is a rather precarious one. For Borges, as is also the case in gnostic cosmogonies, humankind is at the core of his reflection.

Indeed "A Defense of Basilides," after comparing different versions of the gnostic myth, affirms: "What is important is what is common to these narratives: our rash or guilty improvisation out of unproductive matter by a deficient divinity."⁶⁷ As was also the case with the gnostic demiurge, the magician of "The Circular Ruins" does not succeed, despite his efforts, in raising his creature off the ground: "He dreamed an entire man—a young man, but who did not sit up or talk, who was unable to open his eyes. Night after night, the man dreamt him asleep." In the gnostic cosmogonies, demiurges fashion a red Adam who cannot stand; as clumsy, crude and elemental as this Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams forged by the wizard's nights. The dramatic quality of the crucial moment of creation from dust in the passage of Genesis

65 Borges 1972, 25.

66 Borges 1999b, "The Circular Ruins," 100.

67 Borges 1999a, 66.

was exploited by both gnostic cosmogonies and by the Golem legend. This is also the case, by the way, in its more modern version, the cinematographic version of *Frankenstein* (1931), where Peggy Webling's screenplay combines Mary Shelley's novel with known aspects of the medieval legend. Indeed, once the making of the creature has been completed, Frankenstein (the demiurge in a white lab coat) must, since the creature is immobile, elevate its inert body so as to expose it, through a hatch in the roof, to the storm that has just been unleashed. In this way Frankenstein's creature receives the bolt of lightning, the spark of the divine spirit, which in *Nature of the Rulers* (NHC II,4) also gives life to the inert Adam of Genesis:⁶⁸

And the man came to have a soul (and remained) upon the ground many days. But they could not make him arise because of their powerlessness.

Afterwards, the spirit saw the soul-endowed man upon the ground. And the spirit came forth from the Adamantine Land; it descended and came to dwell within him, and that man became a living soul. It called his name Adam, since he was found moving upon the ground.⁶⁹

Similar to the biblical Adam and the one found in the gnostic cosmogonies, the creation of the magician is finally animated by the divinity, and he is then able to rise up and lead an apparently autonomous existence:

... god revealed to him that his earthly name was Fire, and that in this circular temple (and in others like it) people had once made sacrifices to him and worshiped him, and that he would magically animate the dreamed phantom, in such a way that all creatures, except Fire itself and the dreamer, would believe to be a man of flesh and blood. He commanded that once this man had been instructed in all the rites, he should be sent to the other ruined temple whose pyramids were still standing downstream, so that some voice would glorify him in that deserted edifice. In the dream of the man that dreamed, the dreamed one awoke.⁷⁰

This does not mean, however, that the creature shares the divinity of the creator; the latter did not share, in reality, the divinity of the higher God that dreamt him either. This is, indeed, the conclusion of Borges's story. Differing from optimistic gnostic cosmogonies or anthropogonies, Borgesian pessimism

68 Bertman 2015, 42–50.

69 Nat. Rulers NHC II, 4 88.4–16. Translated by Layton 1989, 239.

70 Borges 1999b, 99.

denies humans any possibility of divinity, endowing them with a far more tragic fate. His pessimism rejects not only the existence of a divine spark, but also questions the very nature of the divine; human existence, as we have seen, appears as the result of an infinite procession of dreamers, whose divinity and perfection decrease as they approach the world.

4 Jorge Luis Borges, the "Demiurge"

In the preceding pages we have seen that the various interpretations of "The Circular Ruins," if not plausible to the same extent, do open new vistas on the short story. The metaphor of artistic labor, the deconstructivist manifesto about the death of the author, the medieval legend of the Golem, the social construct of personality and gender—all of them offer, in fact, different facets of the complicated prism that the story of Jorge Luis Borges proposes.

Among all the motifs, the reception of gnostic cosmogonies is especially interesting. The brief review of the five central motifs developed by Borges in "The Circular Ruins" shows clearly that, important though it might be, the motif of the Golem is not the central issue. In fact, it is only the starting point for a deeper analysis that focuses on the implications and consequences of the creative activity of a demiurge, a creator god, as gnostic exegetes had already done. Reality as a dream, the concept of the transcendent divinity beyond our world, the concept of an incompetent demiurge and its imperfect creation, the tangible world we live in, and, finally, humankind, a simple inert puppet in the hands of a secondary divinity incapable of animating it, are all elements that Borges remakes based on the revolutionary gnostic precedent.

The gnostic exegesis includes, almost twenty centuries before Borges, numerous Borgesian motifs. If for Borges the act of writing is the equivalent of rereading or rewriting earlier texts—what Pierre Menard does with the *Quixote*, copying Cervantes's work word by word—the context of a given text does not necessarily coincide more with one of the spatial-temporal coordinates of this text than with another; it could be any other earlier or later text, or texts explicitly or implicitly referred to in it. As a much-cited quote by Borges states, "Four are the stories. During the time we have left we will keep on telling them, transformed."⁷¹

All this shows that gnostic thought in Borges is something more than a source of literary metaphors. His use of gnostic motifs is not simply a matter of

71 Borges, "Cuatro son las historias. Durante el tiempo que nos queda seguiremos narrándolas, transformadas," en "Los cuatro ciclos," en *El oro de los tigres* (1974 [1972] 504).

integrating some elements useful for the construction of his narrative. On the contrary, Borges introduces the gnostic motifs as a starting point for a reflection that he, as always, takes into new territory. First, as far as the first principle, or transcendent God beyond the world is concerned, in Borges this becomes the unsettling possibility of an infinite regression that ends up in disintegration. Second, the figure of the evil creator god, similarly, is no longer the ridiculous arrogant figure of some of the gnostic scriptures. His vanity and incompetence is no longer a matter for derision; he is granted instead room for pity, since his figure is in fact all too human. Third, while the gnostics of Irenaeus, conscious of their divine origin, looked down on the sensible reality and the physical body, Borges denounces the imperfection of both, but does not reject them altogether, since he is aware that this is the only reality within our reach. Fourth, as far as humankind is concerned, we find a similar re-elaboration. While gnostic optimism provided humans with the divine spark that assured their membership in the race of the gods, Borges's view is more somber. Even if apparently free and autonomous, human beings are in fact conceived of as protagonists of someone else's dream, dreamers who are, in turn, dreamed by someone else, thus illustrating Pindar's motto "man is a dream of a shadow."

In this vision of the universe as a large book, any text can be any other text, and can be the transformation of a previous or subsequent story. I hope the analysis of Borges's reception of motifs from the gnostic cosmogonies, which impressed him so much at an early age, will have offered a good example of another assertion by the author according to which "One literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read. If we were able to read any contemporary page—this one, for example—as it would be read in the year 2000, I would know what literature would be like in the year 2000."⁷² Borges's re-reading of gnostic material not only provides these ancient myths with a much more explicit philosophical perspective, it also updates them, making them more accessible to the modern twentieth-century reader.

Acknowledgements

My warm thanks are due to my daughter, Femke Roig Kuhn, who kindly translated into English the first draft of this article, a lecture I delivered in 2017 at the Foundation *Vocación Humana* in Buenos Aires.

⁷² Borges 1973, trans. Simms, "For Bernard Shaw," 164.

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