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Abulafia in the Library

Comparing *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* and Borgesian Letter Combinations

Introduction

In this paper, I will attempt to compare different methods of combination of letters as they appear in works of Abraham Abulafia and in Jorge Luis Borges' story *La Biblioteca de Babel*.¹ In order to do so, in the first part I will analyse the sources, characteristics and possible interpretations of Abulafia's *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot*. In the second part, I will take a closer look on the same subjects in relation to letter combinations as they appear in *La Biblioteca*. While doing so I will draw parallels between Borges' story and Abulafian Kabbalah, in the hope that my analysis will provide some interesting insights into both works.

Part I: Abulafia's *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot*

One of the main characteristics of Abulafian Kabbalah is the method called *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* (Abulafia, 2007) or combination of letters. As Moshe Idel (1988b) put it: “The technique of breaking-down or atomizing the Name is the most distinctive characteristic of Abulafia's technique” (19). This quote is taken from an excerpt in which Idel discusses the combination of letters as a technique to achieve prophecy. In other places he has referred to it as a form of exegesis:

[According to Abulafia] prophets alone – namely, mystics using Abulafian techniques – are worthy of utilizing the “highest” hermeneutic method, which consists of atomizing or monadizing the biblical texts (Idel, 1988a, 235).

The comparison of *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* as a technique to achieve prophecy or as a method of exegesis is an interesting topic nevertheless it shall not be the focus of this paper. For this reason, the references to *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* will be limited to the technique whose aim is to achieve prophecy, except when the contrary is stated. Concerning *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot*, it is worth considering the possible sources that inspired Abulafia to develop this technique/exegesis. Idel, following

¹ *The Library of Babel*. All quotes from this story are from James E. Irby's translation into English available at <http://jubal.westnet.com> (for full URL see other sources).

Scholem (1941), identifies the influence of the German Hasidim. According to Idel (1988b), Abulafia took the idea of combining letters mainly from R. Eleazar of Worms and R. Abraham ibn Ezra. However, while discussing the possible influences of Abulafia in *The Mystical Experience*, Idel does not give any particular relevance to *Sefer Yetzirah*. If the work and commentaries of the German Hasidim were important, even more so was *Sefer Yetzirah*. In relation to Abulafia's biography, Scholem writes:

In Barcelona he began to study the book *Yetzirah* and twelve commentaries to it showing both philosophic and Kabbalistic inclinations. Here, too, he seems to have come into contact with a conventicle the members of which believed they could gain access to the profoundest secrets of mystical cosmology and theology “by the three methods of Kabbalah, being *Gematria*, *Notarikon* and *Temurah*.” Abulafia specially mentions one Baruch Togarmi, precentor, as his teacher, who initiated him into the true meanings of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (126-127).

Also in the short biography of Abulafia found in Idel et. al. we read:

At the age of thirty-one [Abulafia] returned to Barcelona, where he immersed himself in the study of the book '*Yetzirah*' [Creation] and its numerous commentaries (Idel, Arzy, Landis, Blanke, 2005, 8).

The degree of influence of *Sefer Yetzirah* on Abulafia's Kabbalah is best expressed in the words of the mystic himself:

Here it is dealt with the glorious and fearful path, through which some of the knowledge of the ineffable name is revealed, about which is hinted in *Sefer Yetzirah*, second chapter, where it is said [...] “He engraved them, hewed them, weighed them, permuted them, combined them and with them He formed the *Nefesh* of the whole creation and the *Nefesh* of everything that is formed” (8).

The concept of centrality of *Sefer Yetzirah* also appears in several passages of R. Natan ben Saadia Harar's *Shaare Tzedek*:

So I gave in and he taught me the method of the permutations and combinations of letters and the mysticism of numbers and the other “Paths of the *Sefer Yetzirah*”

(Quoted by Scholem, 1941, 149).

Another reason to consider *Sefer Yetzirah* as one of the main influences is that this book provided Abraham Abulafia with a model for *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot*. The model for Abraham Abulafia was no other than that of a homonymous patriarch:

When Abraham our father came, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and understood, and carved, and combined, and hewed, and pondered, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him [...] He bound twenty-two letters into his language, and the Holy One revealed him the secrets (Hayman, 2004, 182).²

In this passage, the two Abrahams – the Biblical and the ecstatic Kabbalist – seem to merge in one.

Once the seminal importance of *Sefer Yetzirah* has been established, I will attempt to describe main characteristics of *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot*. I will leave aside the considerations between the three modi of the ecstatic experience (written-*miktav*, speech-*miyta* and thought-*mahshav*, according to Scholem (1941); similarly in Idel (1988b)) and focus on the letter combination itself. The sources which I have studied do not explicitly answer whether Abulafia used the whole alphabet to make combinations or only those letters that form the Names of God. These would range from the Tetragrammaton to the three Holy Names of 72 letters, each built from the triad of 72-lettered verses in Exodus 14:19-21 (Scholem, 1941). Abulafia's method with the concentric circles (3 rows of 8 circles each including the three 72-lettered Holy Names from the Book of Exodus) points in the direction that Abulafia did not base his combinations on the whole alphabet, as in *Sefer Yetzirah*, but rather on a set of pre-established names. Still, the combinatorial possibilities would be immense. Using the circles Abulafia would have 9^8 (ca. 43 million) combinatorial possibilities for each name and 9^{24} (ca. 80,000 trillions³) for the three of them taken together. On the other hand, the combinatorial possibilities for much shorter names, as the Tetragrammaton, would be very limited if the combination would be restricted to the letters present in the name. In these cases, it seems that Abulafia used as a basic pattern, one of the short Holy Names such as the Tetragrammaton, *Adonay* or *El Shadday* and added to it all the letters from the alphabet (Idel, 1988b). In doing so, as when he tried all possible combinations of vocalization for the Tetragrammaton, Abulafia can be said to try

² *Sefer Yetzirah* § 61 from the manuscript in the Vatican Library. In this passage, it also says “And [the Lord] made [Abraham] sit in his lap, and kissed him upon his head.” For some reason, Idel (1988b) doesn't mention this quote when he discusses the image of the kiss in Abulafian Kabbalah.

³ I use long scale notation; one trillion = 10^{18} .

to crack the secrets of the Holy Names through the application of an algorithm.⁴ This systematic application of a given principle is what probably makes Abulafian Kabbalah more a method (from the Greek *méthodos*, systematic course) than a technique (from the Greek *téchne*, art or craft⁵). According to Idel, the method was adopted by Abulafia from R. Eleazar of Worms, establishing one of the major proofs of the influence of German Hasidim on the ecstatic Kabbalist. While I have found no mention of free combinations of letters in Abulafia without recourse to the Holy Names, in *Shaare Tzedek*, I would like to point out to the following reprimand to R. Natan ben Saadia Harar as he was being initiated:

And who was it that allowed you to touch the Name? Did I not tell you to permute only letters? (Quoted by Scholem, 151)

Here it seems that apprentices in the technique of *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* would start by combining random letters from the alphabet and, at a more advanced stage of learning and spiritual insight, they would have access to the letters from the Names of God.

By contrast, in *Sefer Yetzirah*, the whole alphabet is used for combinations, though there seems to be a hierarchy between the three primary letters (*alef, mem, shin*), the seven double letters (*bet, gimel, dalet, kaph, pe, resh, taw*) and the remaining twelve simple letters. *Sefer Yetzirah* (§ 40) also provides us with an insight into the kind and number of possible combinations:

How did he combine them? – two stones build two houses; three build six houses; four build twenty-four houses, five build one hundred and twenty houses; six build seven hundred and twenty houses; seven build five thousand and forty houses. From here on go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the eye cannot see, and what the ear cannot hear (Hayman, 135).

According to this passage, God used a factorial function to create the universe from letters.

<i>Sefer Yetzirah</i>	<i>n!</i>	Result
two stones build two houses	2!	$2 \times 1 = 2$
three build six houses	3!	$3 \times 2 \times 1 = 6$

⁴ Maybe for this reason, Umberto Eco named the computer that appears in *Foucault's Pendulum* Abulafia.

⁵ I make this remark as a general consideration. In this paper, though, I use “technique” and “method” often as synonyms.

four build twenty-four houses	4!	$4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 24$
five build one hundred and twenty houses	5!	$5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 120$
six build seven hundred and twenty houses	6!	$6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 720$
seven build five thousand and forty houses	7!	$7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 5,040$

fig. 1

Bringing this table to its logical conclusion, it would mean that by 22 letters there are 22! possible combinations (ca. 1,124 trillions). Both using Abulafia's circles or the method described in *Sefer Yetzirah* the number of possible combinations is huge though finite.

After discussing more technical aspects, I will now comment on how the ecstatic experience unfolds through the combination of letters. This will be particularly relevant later in the paper. According to Idel (1988a):

When a man strives for a ultimate mystical experience he must break the structured language, as he needs to efface the forms inscribed in his mind in order to make room there for higher entities to dwell [...] The disintegration of social language into meaningless units is considered by Abulafia as the path of transformation of human language into divine names (235-236).

In the quoted passage Idel describes the ecstatic experience as a process in three stages. This appears to be a process of condensation through dissolution:

Linguistic level	social language	→ <i>dissolves</i> <i>into</i>	letters/meaningless units	→ <i>condenses</i> <i>into</i>	Divine Names ⁶
Epistemological level	human consciousness		void/nothingness		prophecy ⁷
Ontological level	life		death		the world to come

fig. 2

I have added an ontological level to these three stages, which shall be understood as a transit from life (*ha-olam ha-ze*), through death (*ha-kever*) into the world to come (*ha-olam ha-ba*), with

⁶ Probably understood as unrevealed aspects of the already known Holy Names, though the line between a modified name through letter combinations and a whole new name is very tenuous.

⁷ Understood as union with the Divine Intellect.

the particularity that most of the times the mystic is allowed to preserve his life once the experience is over. Still, the experience has a life-threatening flavour, and the possibility of dying during it can never be completely ruled out (Idel, 1988b). In relation to this, in several places Abulafia draws a parallel between the ecstatic experience and the world to come. Regarding the dissolutive aspect of *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot*, we find an example in *Shaare Tzedek*:

My son, it is not the intention that you come to a stop with some finite or given form, even though it be of the highest order: Much rather is this the “Path of Names”: The less understandable they are, the higher their order, until you arrive at the activity of a force which is no longer in your control, but rather your reason and your thought is in its control (Scholem, 149).

Whereas, in the texts written by Abulafia we find proof of the condensative aspect, not only on the epistemological level but also on the linguistic level:

Know that mental [letter-]combination performed in the heart brings forth a word, [the latter] being [the result of the letter-]combination, entirely mental and born from the sphere of the intellect (Idel, 1988b, 20).

In spite of this remark, Abulafia's method seems to focus mainly on the first – dissolutive – movement. Once the dissolution has been achieved, it is unclear how the condensation occurs. According to the quote from *Shaare Tzedek*, the hyperactive method advocated by Abulafia would gain momentum until it would finally override “reason and thought” through a “force” generated by the frenetic combination. It seems that the process itself impels the mystic beyond the second stage of language and consciousness, allowing them the leap into prophecy. In the literature surveyed for the purpose of this paper I have not found any references to an “act of grace” as a means to breach the gap with prophecy. The method, if properly applied, seems to bare results by itself, without help of divine intervention.

At this point, it is worth examining different ways in which *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* have been understood by Kabbalah scholars and Kabbalists respectively. According to Idel (1988b, 20), there are three approaches to the knowledge of the Divine Names through the combination of letters: the informative, the magical and the ecstatic approach. In relation to these three approaches, Idel writes:

The Holy Name contains within itself “scientific” readings of the structure of the world

and its activities, thereby possessing both an “informative” character and magical powers [...] In Abulafia's view [the structure of the Holy Name] must be destroyed in order to exploit the “prophetic” potential of these Names and to create a series of new structures by means of letter combinations. In the course of the changes taking place in the structure of the Name, the structure of human consciousness likewise changes (29).

Following Idel, thanks to *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* the Kabbalist would have access to the secrets of physics and science. The idea that the natural world has an underlying linguistic structure has some bearing on the philosophy of language. As Umberto Eco (1995) points out, there is a radical difference between language understood as a human convention – a position argued by Aristotle and subsequently Maimonides – and the notion that language existed before the world and provided the structure for its creation. As to the magical powers of the combination of letters, these would refer to the ability to affect supernatural changes in the world through this method.⁸ Finally, the ecstatic approach is presented as a process of parallel changes between the structure of the Holy Names and the structure of human consciousness. As the Kabbalist changes the Holy Names, he changes himself.

Scholem, on the contrary, understands *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* primarily as a technique to produce an object of contemplation for the mystic. Conversely to Christianity, Jewish iconoclasm made it difficult for mystics to find an absolute object to meditate upon. In this context:

[Abulafia] looks for something capable of acquiring the highest importance, without having much particular, or if possible any, importance of its own. An object which fulfils all these conditions he believes himself to have found in the Hebrew alphabet, in the letters which make up the written language [...] It is Abulafia's purpose to present [the soul] with something not merely abstract but also not determinable as an object in the strict sense [...] Basing himself upon the abstract and non-corporeal nature of script, he develops a theory of the mystical contemplation of letters and their configurations, as the constituents of God's name (132).

It is indeed debatable if for Abulafia the Hebrew letters did not have “much particular, or if possible any, importance.” In a different passage Scholem (1965) writes: “The letters of the

⁸ The creation of the Golem is a clear case of the magical approach: “R. Eleazar [...] wrote that we must pronounce all the letters of the alphabet over every limb of the Golem, combined with one of the letters of the Tetragrammaton” (Idel 1988a, 100).

alphabet – and how much more those of the divine name or of the entire Torah [...] – have secret, magical power” (167). I would argue that this is applicable to Abulafia as well. Going one step further, we could consider the hypothesis that each letter of the alphabet is a Name of God in itself. This idea echoes in Idel’s thinking when he writes that: “The assertion of [R. Eleazar of Worms] that each of the forty-two letters of the divine name is a divine name in itself obviously reflects an ancient Jewish conception” (1988a, 99). I would therefore argue that Abulafian Kabbalah illustrates a unique case of “alphabet worship.” Regardless of these considerations, Scholem’s insight is illuminating when he writes that the letters of the alphabet had exceptional qualities as abstractions and non-corporeal objects. These qualities allowed them to become *kosher* objects of worship. Following Idel, letters do not lack in importance but in meaning. They are meaningless units and this characteristic enables them to produce the dissolutive movement that I have previously described.

To complete this survey, Scholem (1941) also describes *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* as a “music of pure thought”:

The systematic practice of meditation as taught by [Abulafia] produces a sensation akin to that of listening to musical harmonies. The science of combination is a music of pure thought, in which the alphabet takes the place of the musical scale. We find here compositions and modifications of motifs and their combination in every possible variety. This is what Abulafia himself says about it in one of his unpublished writings: “Know that the method of *tzeruf* can be compared to music; for the ear hears sounds from various combinations, in accordance with the character of the melody and instrument” (33).

This description associates the method of *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* with ideas of harmony, beauty and pleasure. In this case, the meaningless symbols (i.e. letters) are transformed into meaningless sounds that interweave forming harmonies. In spite of this similarity, there is an apparent contradiction between the enjoyment of their music and the obliteration of “reason and thought”. This discrepancy could be tentatively overcome if the former is associated to the speech-*mivta* stage of the ecstatic experience and the latter to the thought-*mahshav*.

Finally, there is another way to understand *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* that is not explicitly expressed by any of the scholars mentioned, though it can be inferred from their works. According to Idel (1988a):

[Ecstatic Kabbalah] emphasized, more than did theosophical Kabbalah, the chasm between the spiritual and the material: with the goal of attaining liberation from the bonds of corporeality, ecstatic Kabbalah worked on the means of severing the connection between the human soul and its body (207).

The method of the combination of letters can be interpreted in this context as well. In the same way the ecstatic Kabbalist breaks the bond between soul and body, he also breaks the connection between the letter and the text. Here is where exegesis and ecstatic technique unite. The liberation of the soul is affected through the liberation of the letter. This is consistent with the conception that Abulafia had of the plain meaning of scriptures. According to Abulafia: “The curse of the plain [meaning] is the blessing of the hidden one, and the curse of the hidden [meaning] is the blessing of the plain [one]” (Quoted by Idel, 1988a, 207-208). It is no wonder, therefore, that “Abulafia's hermeneutics culminated in a text-destroying exegesis⁹ that focused on separate letters understood as divine names” (208). The movement of detextualizing the letter brings forth and prefigures the disembodiment of the soul.

Part II: Letter Combinations in J.L. Borges' *La Biblioteca de Babel*

In the second part, I will attempt to draw a comparison between Abulafia's *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* and Borges' motif of letter combinations in his short story *La Biblioteca de Babel*. I believe that this comparison can be constructive for understanding of Abulafian Kabbalah and its implications. For this purpose, I will follow a similar structure as in the first part, discussing Borges' sources, the characteristics of letter combinations in his story and possible interpretations.

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) wrote *La Biblioteca de Babel* in 1941, the same year Gershom Scholem wrote *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*. Although Borges read Scholem's book (Alazraki, 1988), it is certain he did it after writing *La biblioteca de Babel*. In a poem written in 1958, *El Golem*, Borges includes a mention to Scholem and one of his works, probably *Major Trends*:

El cabalista que ofició de numen That cabbalist who played at being God
A la vasta criatura apodó Golem; Gave his spacey offspring the nickname Golem.
Estas verdades las refiere Scholem In a learned passage of his volume,

⁹ The expression “text-destroying exegesis” seems to be an oxymoron, but it beautifully expresses the tension between interpreting the text and transcending it through its annihilation.

En und docto lugar de su volumen these truths have been conveyed to us by Scholem .

(Borges, 1999, 193; Trueblood, Alan S., tr.)

In a later interview, Borges confessed that the reason why he mentioned Scholem in his poem was because he had difficulties in finding a word that rhymed with Golem. In 1969 Borges won the Jerusalem Prize and was invited to Israel to collect his award. During his visit in Israel, Borges expressed his wish to meet with Scholem, a request that was granted to him (Alazraki, 1988, 6). Scholem, however, did not have Borges' knowledge of Kabbalah in a very high regard, as it has been explicitly expressed in his early works:

I think that the first Kabbalistic influences on Borges were not of a very serious kind. He might have read the French and English occultists, of the sort of Papus and the like. There is, of course, also the influence from the Golem. In his literature he uses Kabbalistic elements but most of his works were already written when he read my books. Borges read my books later, when almost all his work was already written (Quoted by Kazmierczak, 2005 from Barnatán, 1978).

In spite of Scholem's dismissing comments, Borges wrote two essays exclusively about the Kabbalah during his life: *Una vindicación de la cábala*¹⁰ (1932) and *La cábala* (1980). In another essay titled *Del culto a los libros*¹¹ and a large number of his works of fiction (*El Zahir*, *El Aleph*, *La muerte y la brújula*¹², etc.) we can find plenty of Kabbalistic references. One of the reasons of Borges' interest in Kabbalah was that he believed to have some Sephardic ancestry (Alazraki, 7), though in the article *Yo, judío*¹³ from 1934 he denied it. According to Borges, his first Kabbalistic influences came from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

I found [out about Kabbalah] in Longfellow's translation of the *Divine Comedy* [...] There is a three-page appendix in that translation that Longfellow took from a book – I believe it was *Rabbinical Literature* – by J. P. Stehelin¹⁴ where there is a discussion of the Hebrew alphabet and the different meanings and values that the Kabbalists attributed to those letters. And the other reference must have come from the *Brittanica* (Alazraki, 5).

¹⁰ “A Defence of the Kabbalah”

¹¹ “About the Cult of Books”. My translation.

¹² “Death and the Compass”

¹³ “I, a Jew.” My translation.

¹⁴ This is a selected English translation of J. A. Eisenmenger's (1654-1704) classic anti-Semitic book *Entdecktes Judenthum*.

Another hint to Borges' influences is to be found in *La muerte y la brújula*. In this story, written just one year after *La biblioteca de Babel*, there is a reference to *Sefer Yetzirah*. In *Del culto a los libros*, an essay written in 1951, Borges quotes one of the most well-known passages of *Sefer Yetzirah* (§19 in Hayman):

Twenty-two letters: he carved them out, he hewed them, he weighed them and exchanged them, he combined them and formed with them the life of all creation and the life of all that would be formed (100-101).

It is worth noting that, in spite of the differences between the quote of *Sefer Yetzirah* given by Abulafia and the one given by Borges, both of them deal with the combination of letters and their creative powers. Although ten years separate *La biblioteca de Babel* from *Del culto a los libros*, it is not unreasonable to believe that Borges already knew about this quote in 1941. This would be consistent with what Borges said was his first contact with Kabbalah (“a discussion of the Hebrew alphabet and the different meanings and values that the Kabbalists attributed to those letters” (Alazraki, 5). Borges was talented for languages but never learnt Hebrew. In an essay from 1980, *La cábala*, he mentioned having read a Spanish translation of *Sefer Yetzirah* by León Dujovne. This translation, though, was not published until 1966.

Another influence was Gustav Meyrink's novel *The Golem* that young Borges read in 1916. This was the first book that Borges read in German and caused a vivid impression in him (Alazraki, 6-7). The most probable hypothesis, therefore, is that by the time of writing *La Biblioteca de Babel* Borges would have been acquainted with scanty Kabbalistic references from secondary literature, including anti-Semitic books. Nevertheless, he knew about the existence of *Sefer Yetzirah*, and probably was familiar with the quote provided above. Given Borges' superficial acquaintance with Kabbalah, it is striking that the central motif in *La Biblioteca de Babel* are all possible combinations of an alphabet of 22 letters (a reference, most critics agree, to the Hebrew alphabet). I would argue that, in the same way that *Sefer Yetzirah* inspired the method of letter combinations to Abulafia, it also inspired the motif of *La Biblioteca de Babel* to Borges.

In contrast to *Sefer Yetzirah* and Abulafian Kabbalah, in *La Biblioteca de Babel* the combination of characters does not happen in the mind of God or the Kabbalist but it is captured in books. The narrator in the story mentions that all the books are written from 25 characters (an alphabet of 22 letters plus blank space, comma and period). Each book has 410 pages, while each

page contains 40 lines and each line 80 characters. Each book, therefore, has 1,312,000 characters. Taking into account that each book is unique and that all books together exhaust the combinatory possibilities of the 25 characters, we reach the conclusion that the Library contains $25^{1,312,000}$ books. The monstrosity of this number becomes apparent if we take into consideration that, according to Stephen Hawking, there are 10^{80} particles in the observable universe (Dennett, 1995). The figures managed in the case of the combinations imagined by Abulafia and *Sefer Yetzirah* also dwindle in comparison. In spite of this, the “Dictionary of Abulafia” – an imaginary book containing all possible Holy Names – remains the cornerstone for the Library of Babel.¹⁵ The question is, what are the implications of this extraordinary large numbers? I would argue that they stand for a paradox: these figures are not infinite and, yet, they cannot be conceived. Any attempt of doing so would put the mind under a strain whose effects would resemble the hyperactivity of the Abulafian technique. Quoting Archimedes:

There are some, King Gelon, who think that the number of the sand is infinite in multitude; and I mean by the sand not only that which exists about Syracuse and the rest of Sicily but also that which is found in every region whether inhabited or uninhabited. Again there are some who, without regarding it as infinite, yet think that no number has been named which is great enough to exceed its multitude (Quoted by Goldbloom, 2008, 11).

This kind of extremely large numbers reveals the tension between the possible and the feasible. It is logically possible to produce all letter combinations as described in Abulafian Kabbalah, since it is possible in theory to count all grains of sand in the Earth. Any attempt to fulfil any of these tasks, though, will prove unfeasible. In the realm of action, the possible becomes impossible for such cases. This paradox can help us to break the grip of reason over reality and to open the way for other forms of consciousness. Simultaneously, reflecting upon such numbers – the enormously large but finite, present either in nature or in thought – we become aware of our own smallness and finitude. These numbers are awe-inspiring and, for the religious person, they might be a sign of God's imprint on Creation.

The relation between numbers and letters (or combinatory possibilities and the alphabet of 22 characters) is one of the most prominent Kabbalistic traits of *La Biblioteca de Babel*. On the level of

¹⁵ Maybe, after all, the Dictionary of Abulafia is the “total book” mentioned by the narrator: “On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of *all the rest*: some librarian has gone through it and he is analogous to a god” (Borges, 1941, see other sources).

language, the Library is once more a paradox. On the one hand, the Library is a repository of all wisdom and knowledge. On the other hand, if we would consider these books of knowledge to be authentic, we would find that they are mixed up with myriads of pseudo-copies whose variations range from one sign to full passages completely subverting the message of the original book. Everything is to be found in the Library and it means that the singularity of reliable knowledge is drown by the vast multiplicity of falsehood and distortion. According to the narrator (Borges, 1941), what we can find in the Library is:

Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogues of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.

All these books containing wisdom and folly are but a tiny fraction of the total. Even if most of them are just the scheme of a mad or wicked author, they at least convey some sort of meaning. The real problem is that the overwhelming majority of the books contain nothing but utter gibberish. Even if the Library contains all books of knowledge, the probability to find any one of them among all the useless books is computable to zero. This is the real nature of the Library, myriads of bookshelves filled with nonsense. As it has been observed: “Our libraries are useful, not so much for the books they contain, but for the books they don't contain!” (Standish, 2005, 15).

Following this paradox, we have traced a similar path as in the dissolutive movement at the linguistic level in Abulafia's Kabbalah (*fig. 1*). Here, as in the case of the ecstatic experience, social language has dissolved into meaningless units. The main difference is that these units are not letters any more but whole books. Analogously to Abulafia, the dissolution is accompanied by the shadow of death. The Library seems to magnify into cosmic proportions the motifs already present in Abulafia. Accordingly, what is at stake in the story of the Library is not the life of an individual but that of the whole species:

Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned suicides, more and more frequent with the years. Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species – the unique species – is about to be extinguished, but the

Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret (Borges, 1941).

The Library appears to be ridden by entropy and randomness, making it completely useless. The inability to make sense of the Library is bringing humanity to self-destruction. The story ends with such pessimistic note and it would seem that the paths of Abulafia and Borges depart here. Where the mystic achieved the leap into prophecy and the world to come, humanity in Borges' story is heading towards an unintelligible universe and extinction. Before the end, however, the author provides us with a hint that points into a different direction:

I cannot combine some characters

dhcmlchtdj

which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god.

Echoing Abulafia, the narrator senses that any combination of letters might be the name of a god.¹⁶ As opposed to many others, the narrator does not consider that the vast amounts of incomprehensible books are filled with gibberish. Just before the previous passage quoted above she mentions:

The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know) of “the feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity.” These words, which not only denounce the disorder but exemplify it as well, notoriously prove their authors' abominable taste and desperate ignorance. In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures, all variations permitted by the twenty-five orthographical symbols, but not a single example of absolute nonsense (Borges, 1941).

And also:

¹⁶ Or, by analogy, *a* Name of God.

It is verisimilar that [humanity's mysteries] could be explained in words: if the language of philosophers is not sufficient, the multiform Library will have produced the unprecedented language required, with its vocabularies and grammars.

For the narrator the Library is justified from a philosophic and a mystical point of view. On the one hand, what seems to be utter gibberish might be the yet unknown language to decipher the secrets of the universe. On the other, each letter combination may spell a powerful Holy Name. The narrator is able to see the other shore – the land of prophecy – but she does not achieve the breakthrough. There is something in the Library that pulls her down towards death and annihilation: “The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms.” We could say that the narrator is a Kabbalah scholar, not a Kabbalist. She understands the importance and potential of the Library from a theoretical point of view. She senses that each word might be one of the Names of God but she is still unable to actualize this knowledge into experience.

It is rather telling that the setting of Borges' story is a library. In its midst, librarians (a term synonymous with human beings) spend their lives browsing through nonsensical books in search of something worth cognition. Their expectation of acquiring knowledge is mediated by books but rarely it is the outcome of a first-hand experience of the phenomena they read about, which is the reason why, when they do not find anything in the books, they despair. If epistemology could be divided into first-hand and secondary knowledge¹⁷, the Library would be a place where, given its characteristics, only first-hand knowledge can bare meaningful results but human beings are tragically absorbed in acquiring knowledge through books. This is related to the books called Vindications:

At that time a great deal was said about the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future. Thousands of the greedy abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed up the stairways, urged on by the vain intention of finding their Vindication (Borges, 1941).

Librarians were not interested in living their own lives, they wanted to know all about them in advance. This quest brought the librarians to their ruin. Abulafia's Kabbalah, on the contrary, was all

¹⁷ I borrow the distinction from Bertrand Russell (1912), though instead of “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description” I prefer to talk about first-hand knowledge and secondary knowledge.

about gaining insight through initiation and personal experience. His works were not meant to be studied but to guide practice. No other mystic was probably so much aware of the virtues and limits of language as Abulafia. It is a commonplace that words cannot convey the ecstatic experience, but maybe less so that learning without practice probably results in a distorted picture of *devekut*. In Abulafia, the combinations happened in the mind of the Kabbalist. As the Kabbalist changes the Holy Names, he changes himself. In the case of the Library, the combinations have already taken place and are printed in external, inanimate objects. This might pose questions for Kabbalah scholarship as to what extent a method can be understood when first-hand experience of it is not possible anymore.

In *La Biblioteca de Babel* the Abulafian, i.e. experiential path, is also hinted in a manner which very much resembles a reference to *Sefer Yetzirah*:

A blasphemous sect suggested that the searches should cease and that all men should juggle letters and symbols until they constructed, by an improbable gift of chance, these canonical books. The authorities were obliged to issue severe orders. The sect disappeared, but in my childhood I have seen old men who, for long periods of time, would hide in the latrines with some metal disks in a forbidden dice cup and feebly mimic the divine disorder.

In *La Biblioteca de Babel* Kabbalists are persecuted and the so-called non-sectarian systems of thought thrive with the support of the authorities. In spite of this hygienic measures – or maybe because of them – the librarians are heading towards extinction. This could be either understood as Borges' indictment of our modern civilization or as the summit of his scepticism.

The discussion about the different approaches of Abulafia and the librarians highlights the importance of the oral tradition. In the Library, the oral tradition has been downgraded to rumours or vague accounts of the past. As a consequence, the uninitiated are left without guidance to find their way in the maze of hexagonal rooms. Even if the Library contains all possible written combinations, there is something that cannot be reduced to printed characters. The relationship established between the master and the disciple has several layers impervious to transcription. In the case of non-verbal communication for instance, words can only attempt to describe it. Performance, by definition, is beyond its possibilities. The limits of written language as a teaching tool have also been discussed by Plato (2005) following the tale of Theuth and Thamus (61-62). In Abulafian Kabbalah the text is presented as an aide to the disciple but not as a substitute to the master. As a

carrier of the oral tradition and someone experienced in the ecstatic techniques that the disciple wants to learn, the master remains irreplaceable.

In light of what has been said, the refusal of Maimonides to meet R. Samuel ibn Tibbon, the translator of *The Guide of the Perplexed* into Hebrew, is particularly relevant. As Idel (1994) points out, Maimonides wanted to deliver only a written text, without recourse to the oral tradition (296). Avoiding any personal contact with his translator, the Rambam would prevent any attempt by R. Samuel ibn Tibbon or his disciples to claim a real or fictitious oral tradition received from him. According to Idel, Maimonides' aim was to preserve the ambiguity of the written form. Maimonides conceived several layers in the *Guide*, deliberately concealing the core of his ideas. The oral tradition, while suggesting an authoritative reading, could only undermine Maimonides' effort to make a complete understanding of the *Guide* elusive. At the same time, the lack of a definitive reading had the potential to turn the *Guide* into the focus of constant reflection and discussion, as it finally occurred in the Jewish intellectual world.

As the case of Maimonides makes clear, the lack of an oral tradition can become an incentive for the dissemination and discussion of a given text. The *Guide*, however, is basically a philosophical text, and teaching any specific method or technique does not count among its aims. The works of Abulafia, by contrast, belong to the mystical – or at least mystical-philosophical – literature and focus strongly on the praxis. Furthermore, these texts stress the importance of the relation between the master and the disciple in order for the latter to get hold of the technique. The particulars of their relationship is something that cannot be codified in a book. It is no surprise therefore that, contrarily to the Rambam, Abulafia conceived the oral tradition and oral transmission of his secrets as part and parcel of his teaching activity (Idel, 1994, 297). The librarians in Borges' story seem caught between a nightmarish version of both approaches. Instead of philosophy, their books contain nonsense and their oral tradition is all but lost.

Conclusion

In this paper my aim was to compare *Tzeruf ha-Otiyyot* in Abulafian Kabbalah with the letter combinations as expressed in Borges' *La Biblioteca de Babel*. I have argued that both authors derived their insights from *Sefer Yetzirah*, though in Borges the acquaintance with this book was probably limited to a brief passage. In the case of Abulafia, *Sefer Yetzirah* also provided him with a

model for his activity as a Kabbalist in the figure of the patriarch Abraham. I have also taken a closer look to the combinatory techniques of both authors, in terms of letters considered, method and number of possible combinations. This comparison has highlighted one aspect of the parallelism between Abulafia and Borges: several of the motifs developed by the Kabbalist appear in the work of the Argentinian author amplified into cosmic proportions. Similarly, the individualistic approach of Abulafia turns into a full-blown universal drama in the hands of Borges. Finally, I have attempted to discuss possible interpretations of the combination of letters in both authors. In the works of Abulafia I have identified the dissolutive-condensative move at the linguistic, epistemological and ontological level. Whereas, in *La Biblioteca*, I have been able to observe the dissolutive move. The condensative move, however, is only hinted in Borges' story without being actualized. I have traced the lack of condensative/ecstatic aspects in *La Biblioteca de Babel* to the differences between the first-hand experience of the Kabbalists and the secondary experience of the librarians. This point has led to a discussion about the oral tradition in Abulafian Kabbalah and in Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*. In line with Borges' pessimism, the Library suggests the worst combination of both approaches: a universe of meaningless texts and people without memory.

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