PART THREE

JEWISH AND *LO LATINOAMERICANO* IN THE ARTS
CHAPTER SEVEN

BORGES AND THE KABBALAH: PRE-TEXTS TO A TEXT

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Todas las cosas son palabras del
Idioma en que Alguien o Algo, noche y día
Escribe esa infinita algarabía
Que es la historia del mundo. (…)  
Borges, “Una brújula”

I. A Navigational Chart

An iconic picture of Borges (1899–1986) shows him kneeling down on the floor looking for a book. Shot by Sara Facio in 1968 at the Biblioteca Nacional [“National Library”]—and simply and sufficiently titled “Borges”—it is at the most basic, ‘portrait of a man looking for a book.’ By focusing on the intensity of his face and imagining the searching hands hidden from view by three rows of books, we also understand it as an allusion to the heresiarcas, who spent their lives seeking access to the secrets of the library that is the world and to the unfathomable being that launched it all. Once readers penetrate beyond the initial semblance of order that defines Borges’s universe; when readers, moreover, also engage sources anchored in Jewish tradition and mysticism, a system begins to orbit both worlds and a dialogue across speculative inquiries is inevitably forged.

The earliest scholarly entry that links Borges and the Kabbalah can be found in a special issue of L’Herne dedicated to Borges. In “Fascination de la Kabbale,” Rabí briefly noted the shared motifs of the labyrinth, the Golem, and of God’s Ineffable Name. Several years later,

1 “Una brújula,” in El otro, el mismo [1964], Obras completas (Buenos Aires: Emecé editores, 1974), 875. Unless otherwise noted, all Borges quotes refer to this edition marked OC.