

“She was unable not to think”:  
Borges’ “Emma Zunz” and the  
Female Subject



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Celebrated by formalists, structuralists, and deconstructionists alike as a demystifier par excellence,<sup>1</sup> Borges preempted many of the perturbing aspects about post-modernist literature and contemporary critical theory, aspects that still arouse suspicion for more traditionally-oriented readers. In his distinctive way of making literature its own commentary, he created his own precursors, modifying our conception of literary history and modifying its future.<sup>2</sup> We identify him as a post-modernist writer and critic primarily by the utter gravity of his fictional cunning, by his relentless play with the idea of unlimited rhetorical possibilities, by the way he privileges form over content, structure over essence, event over character. He refined the art of paradox so that even as he subverts teleologies, he preserves mystery (or its formal equivalent, ambiguity). But as the modern critical emphasis has gradually shifted—from locating meaning within an originating

<sup>1</sup> For example, Michel Foucault in his preface to *Les Mots et les Choses*, credits a text of Borges with the birth of the idea of Foucault's book. The Chinese encyclopedia and the library are regarded by Foucault as the most appropriate figures for the absolute self-referentiality of knowledge and discourse. Edward Said cites Borges often in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), and is especially intrigued by the significant Borges/Foucault affinity.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka y sus precursores,” *Otras inquisiciones*, (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1960), pp. 145-48.

author to a formalist text to a collaborative or, in some cases resisting reader—<sup>3</sup> the effects of such rhetorical gesturing may be less ambiguous than certain of Borges' theoretical proponents would have us believe.

"Emma Zunz", perhaps Borges' least characteristic work, is his only story whose protagonist is a woman. Since female characters are conspicuously absent throughout Borges' writings, the mere creation of an Emma Zunz is already an event in itself. This has been taken note of by critics of all persuasions, but for reasons other than my own in the following essay.<sup>4</sup> Displacing the attention from why Borges chose to make a female character the centerpiece of his story (and one who is not a cipher, who is more than the sign of impersonality most often designated by his other characters) to the ideological implications of this choice is my concern here. The problem of authorial intention leads to a very thorny and more compelling critical question: how do the meanings generated by this text pivot on the fact that the subject is a woman?

I say compelling because "Emma Zunz"—beyond its appeal as a formalist puzzle, an untypically realistic tale of revenge, or even as a parable of cosmic destruction and restitution—is a tragedy of restricted choices. As a female figure, whether within a "realistic" or "symbolic" fiction, Emma's possibilities are explicitly derived from a series of reductive dichotomies based on sexual analogy.<sup>5</sup> Such a reading is immediately recognizable as a feminist one. Yet, the intimate interplay of the forces of identity and sexual difference, language and power, intentionality and indeterminacy makes a deconstructive approach the challenging consort to a feminist

<sup>3</sup> See this critical development in ed. Jane Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and eds. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays in Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). For a feminist perspective on reading see Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> From Jaime Alazraki's (*La Prosa narrativa de J. L. Borges*, 1968) and Ronald Christ's (*The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Illusion*, 1969) well-respected analyses to a recent article by Edna Aizenburg ("Emma Zunz: A Kabbalistic Heroine in Borges' Fiction" from *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, no. 3, 1983). Aizenburg's fascinating contribution to the discussion is the revelation of the Kabbalistic elements in the story. She ties these to Emma's status as a Jewish woman. In her article, the mythical/mystical side of Borges resurges to balance those views that consider this tale to be "merely" realistic.

<sup>5</sup> Analogy is "one of the eternal operations which support the defining of difference in function of the a priori of the same." Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1979), p. 28.

interpretation. Tracing this critical rapport will show why this narrative is a model one for examining some issues that are central to contemporary critical theory and to feminist theory, in particular.

The goals of feminism and deconstruction do not naturally proceed hand in hand, though the theoretical agendas of each have had radical effects upon the textual practices of the other.<sup>6</sup> And, indeed, in a text like "Emma Zunz" the two strategies can be said to converge and diverge until a crucial point in the narrative when the reader must make a critical ideological move that either favors one position or the other. This point in the narrative is a performative moment of suspended revelation, when the implications of Emma's sex / speech act are grounded precisely in the interplay of forces I name above.

For both kinds of critics the notion of difference is supremely important, its significance turning on the ways in which the relation between textual and sexual difference is interpreted.<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida's deliberately unsystematic presentation of *différance* is impossible to reduce to a word, concept or any positive definition. Articulated through this term are both its spatial and temporal aspects: to differ, to be unlike or dissimilar in quality, nature, or form; or to scatter and disperse; to defer, to delay, postpone.

What we note as *différance* will thus be the movement or play that "produces" (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* which produces differences is before them in a simple and in itself unmodified and indifferent present. *Différance* is the nonfull, non-simple "origin;" it is the structured and differing origin of differences.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This is especially true for French Feminism, which speaks from within, to and against contemporary critical theory—particularly in implicit dialogue with Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. Most helpful for American readers on French Feminism and the theories of "écriture féminine" are the collections of translated excerpts, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron; and the papers from The Scholar and the Feminist Conference, Barnard College Women's Center, *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Company, 1980), ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine; *SIGNS*, an issue devoted to French feminist theory, Autumn 1981, Vol. 7, No. 1, and *Yale French Studies*, no 62. For further reading see the classics of the Movement, "The Laugh of the Medusa," translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *SIGNS*, Summer 1976, pp. 875-93, and Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1977) and *Le Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Testimony to the strong interest in the concept for feminists today in America as well as abroad are the numerous collections devoted primarily to it. For examples, see above.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 141.

Thus differance designates a passive difference already in existence as the condition that makes meaning possible, and an act of differing or deferring which produces difference. It cannot, however, be construed as the unadulterated alternative to sameness, or its negation, upon which could be based a new ontology perpetuating another metaphysical or ideological order.

It is not a being-present, however excellent, unique, principal or transcendent one makes it. It commands nothing, rules over nothing, and nowhere does it exercise any authority. It is not marked by a capital letter. Not only is there no realm of difference, but difference is even the subversion of every realm. This is obviously what makes it threatening and necessarily dreaded by everything in us that desires a realm, the past or future presence of a realm.<sup>9</sup>

Michel Foucault alerts us as well to the difficulties that breaking down such conceptual categories poses:

The freeing of difference requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; thought of the multiple—of the nomadic and dispersed multiplicity that is not limited or confined by the constraints of similarity. . . .<sup>10</sup>

As a critical strategy, feminist theorists have had to declare a kind of allegiance to the notion of difference by reappropriating it and reconceptualizing it to women's advantage. Such a strategic decision suggests that the argument over whether subverting or transforming the binary mode of thought is desirable, or even possible, is in some circles, a moot one. For the purposes of this essay the argument is still a vital one, especially as it colludes with the deconstructionist project to break down the structuralist dependence on a dualistic model of thought and language.<sup>11</sup> For the question remains: Is the Masculine/Feminine polarity perhaps the irreducible, the original opposition? And are then all the binary

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Boucher (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> The system of difference that I will suggest throughout this essay is actually construed from an original *suppression* of difference, that very principle of identity, resemblance, and sameness that posits and uses the concept of other to perpetuate its own essentialist properties. The insidiousness of the binary system resides in the fact that even the most enlightened inversion of the two terms (though a necessary first stage) results in regeneration of the same, so that truly challenging the paradigm of normative thought requires more than merely privileging alterity.

oppositions that follow therefrom implicitly valorized according to a system of sexual difference?

In a very lucid overview of the recent developments in feminist criticism, Catherine Stimpson describes the theoretical problem:

The very logic of feminist criticism, its concern with the syllogisms of female and male, entail[s] the tricky, theoretical exploration of sexual difference. . . . Feminist critics disagree about cause, permanence, signs, and significance. [Some reason] that sexual difference reveals both experience and organizing, organized structures-of the body, the conscious mind, the unconscious, and of language. The difference between female and male need not be oppositional. . . . It need not be hierarchical. . . . It might simply be difference, which language would quicken into complete being.<sup>12</sup>

If what both deconstructionists and feminists are deriding is the kind of self-mystifying conceptual mastery that is masked by binary logic (Derrida's logo-centrism), they are only ascribing a critical procedure to what post-modernist writers like Borges have been doing in their critical fictions. A position that advances the engendering of differences suspends the idea of the self that as subject or consciousness serves as the source of meaning and as a principle of resolution or explanation. Rather this self is seen as a figurative construction, a linguistic effect, a specific category and product of discourse.<sup>13</sup> The integral and integrated sovereign subject has been dethroned, whether in the role of author of authoritarian fictions or as character within them. This unitary subject can no longer be read as a unified representation of itself (i.e. Man), for what would that self be, least of all as mediated through language? The very notion of representation relies on and participates in the ontology of sameness—something stands for something else, speaks for, in the place of something else—and thus absorbs all difference into itself by creating a logic of generic, universal, unequivocal identity. The universal identity has traditionally been the masculine; that which is distinguished from and derived from that logically prior

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Stimpson, "On Feminist Criticism" in *What is Criticism?*, ed. Paul Hernadi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 230-41.

<sup>13</sup> See Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami: University of Miami Press). See also "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, edited and translated by Anthony Wilden: "The empty subject—a subject defined only as a locus of relationships and hence impossible to totalize, to define in any way but as a place of intersection of multiple functions, of other voices," p. 182.

identity is the particular feminine. As the very condition that makes possible a relation based on the dichotomy of presence and absence (since language is never present to itself), representation is not merely logocentric, it is phallogocentric. Not only does it inevitably reduce woman to serving as man's mirror (even when the image she sees is not her own), but by denying her the duplicitious powers of self-representation, it reinforces masculine projections of a self that is no less fictive for being male.

Thus there is a strong impulse on the part of contemporary theory to conceive of a mode that fulfills the textual function of enunciating discourse while not maintaining the notion of a certain kind of subject, identity, or self that is intrinsic to both the logic and the romance of Western thought. The irony of such an endeavor at this moment in the history of feminist criticism when (for those schooled in the Anglo-American tradition, at least) its primary goal is precisely to restore, indeed establish, the subject of woman as a unified concept equal to man, cannot be overstated. It points to a current critical controversy, and reveals some of the ideological and strategic conflicts within feminist theory itself regarding the specific nature of women's writing and the implications of essentialism.<sup>14</sup>

Having posited that the status of the subject in current critical terms is both complicated and precarious and that sexual difference does make a difference, let us return to that performative moment in the narrative when the feminist and the deconstructionist (note that I am not precluding the possibility that both might come together within the same reader) must part company. The feminist reader, like the character Emma herself, will locate responsibility (collaborative) and attribute guilt (complicitious) and impose closure on what might otherwise continue towards an infinite play of meaning, arrest this movement and, in effect, suppress ambiguity and aesthetic pleasure for its own sake. Now concrete moral and social commitments will be demanded of the author who, on the one hand, is admired for a special brand of literary finesse and denounced on the other for not attending to the political value of literature and to the "real" referent outside the text.

By contrast, the deconstructionist will delight in the endless displacement of signification and will persistently stave off any per-

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Ann Rosalind Jones' perceptive critique, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *Écriture féminine*," *Feminist Studies* 7, (no. 2) (Summer 1981), pp. 247-63.

ceptible tendency toward pinning the signifier to a/the signified. The ideological impulse (and there certainly is one) is precisely to mediate against any form of idealization, incarnation or hypostasization (Derrida's Transcendental Signifier)—to seek in the theologically-ordained interpretive gesture only another detour, another deferral, further diffusion of meaning. Geoffrey Hartman aptly describes what marks this difference in approach in his preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism*. Using an expression from the preeminent deconstructionist, Nietzsche, that “the deepest pathos is still aesthetic play,” he distinguishes those critics or readers for whom “the ethos of literature is not dissociable from its pathos. For deconstructionist criticism literature is precisely that use of language which can purge pathos, which shows that it too is figurative, ironic, or aesthetic.”<sup>15</sup> Such a distinction resonates strongly for a feminist reading which rejects the aestheticization of suffering<sup>16</sup> and which regards pathos and play (in this text, at least) to be mutually exclusive.

This is all the more provocative because figuration and irony loom large in “Emma Zunz”, as they do in all of Borges' writing. The story uncannily begins with the death of a father. Agonizing over his suicide, Emma seeks revenge against the embezzler who had covered up his crime by unjustly implicating her father. Aaron Loewenthal's accusation had forced Zunz to flee (from Argentina, we assume) to Brazil, where despondent that his name could not be cleared, he took his own life. Emma blames Loewenthal for the original injustice as well as for its ultimate result. Her wish is to guarantee the extinction of her and her father's enemy, but she decides that murder alone will not suffice. She elaborates a scheme to achieve both vengeance on her father's behalf and social justice, without impairing her own liberty or endangering her own life. Only a strategy assuring these ends would be satisfying and expiatory for Emma. Hence she plots the perfect crime, not as a criminal, but as the executor of divine justice.

In Borges' spare prose we etch out a portrait of this 19 year-old

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), p.ix. Here I interpret pathos in the Aristotelian sense, not in the degraded aspect of pity that has characterized the attitude toward victimized literary heroines throughout history.

<sup>16</sup> This is a point skillfully made in the stimulating and insightful review essay of Terry Eagleton's *The Rape of Clarissa*: “Reading Rape: Marxist-Feminist Figurations of the Literal,” by William Beatty Warner in *Diacritics*, Winter 1983.

woman who “se declaró, como siempre contra toda violencia,” and in whom men still inspired “un temor casi patológico.” What complex constellation of motives, what unconscious structures could account for her choice of such carnally violent means to achieve such a pure and abstract end: divine justice?<sup>17</sup>

The opening paragraph is replete with cunningly placed clues and with the depiction of those apparently significant and coherent extra-referential details that a realistic narrative requires and verifies—and whose code a Borgesian narrative always violates. On January 14, 1922 Emma Zunz, a worker in the textile factory of Tarbuch and Loewenthal, learns by letter of the death of her father. The message, written by a boardinghouse friend of Mr. Maier, relates the actual cause of death—accidental overdose of pills—and the name of the city in which he died. What follows is the description, at once both precise and abstract, of Emma’s reaction to the news that she has become an orphan. Emma is the protagonist, but she is literally “without speech” until the finale when she tells her version of the story. Thus it is the narrator’s account that constitutes one part of the double framework of the story, while Emma’s constitutes the other. This adjudicating, interpreting voice renders and often imperceptibly merges with Emma’s in a way that resembles a traditional, reliable third-person omniscient point of view, but whose perspective seems strangely askew. An elusive emotional ambience, pervaded by fatal mystery, is expressed by this mediating presence that hovers somewhere in the borders of Emma’s consciousness as it becomes text.

And yet it is only the impression of interior depth that we are given, of that which constitutes subjecthood for a literary character.

<sup>17</sup> To pursue this suggestive line of investigation—to construct a psychic history—is to immediately situate it at the intersection of two modes: the psychoanalytic and the legal. In both the style and the structure of their arguments, in the accumulation of evidence and the rendering of testimony, these modes are quite similar. And although Borges would take issue with any effort to “unearth” a text’s sedimented symbolic meanings toward the end of “solving” its mystery by using psychoanalytic methods, he reinforces the reader’s desire to do so by cultivating a sense of the uncanny and faith in its intelligible resolution or integration, all the while holding the resolution in abeyance. His use of the judicial or legal is even more manipulative because of its explicit affinity with the detective genre, highly favored by Borges. Exploiting the not-so-subtle distinction in this strange story between “what” really happened and “how” it happened is clearly one of the text’s effects—especially as the “answer” is projected to be “found” somewhere in the dark recesses of Emma’s psyche. But, to search in Emma’s psyche is to overdetermine character at the expense of event; it is the elusive, illusive nature of circumstance, not of personality, that intrigues Borges.



Emma may not be a cipher, but she doesn't quite qualify as a full-blown personality. This raises a question pertinent to our perception of all characters: where does a subject ever reside, if not "between the lines?" Two passages connected by allusion appear to be critical for the reader's understanding of Emma's character and for the entire narrative. And yet, despite or because of their crucial functions, little, except by extreme indirection, can be gleaned from them. The first passage, describing Emma's reactions to the letter, minutely registers a broad range of emotions that seem to be emblematic of a complex psychic state, but they remain cerebral abstractions. And it is from this ostensibly full rendering that the ominous inception of Emma's scheme emerges, the one whose linear or causal logic is undermined throughout the narrative.

Su primera impresión fué de malestar en el vientre y en las rodillas; luego de ciega culpa, de irrealidad de frío, de temor; luego, quiso ya estar en el día siguiente. Acto continuo comprendió que esa voluntad era inútil porque, la muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin. Recogió el papel y se fué a su cuarto. Furtivamente lo guardó en un cajón, como si de algún modo ya conociera los hechos ulteriores. Ya había empezado a vislumbrarlos, tal vez; ya era la que sería.<sup>18</sup>

By the time Emma has endangered and endured her desperate undertaking, the reader is accustomed to the remote but sympathetic narrative perspective, and has intuited what has been explicitly offered as Emma's emotional state. The scene as a whole is poignant, but the description still jars.

Un acto de soberbia y en aquel día . . . El temor se perdió en la tristeza de su cuerpo, en el asco. El asco y la tristeza la encadenaban, pero Emma lentamente se levantó y procedió a vestirse. (p. 63)

Through this rhetoric of intimacy the reader is inclined to perceive herself as witness to the radical transformation of a character. "Ya era la que sería" implicitly and provocatively contrasts with the person Emma used to be. But, who was Emma, who is she "already" and how does the reader discern between one image of her subjective personality and another? Her perception of her happy childhood is contrasted with her present wretchedness, her former

<sup>18</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Emma Zunz", in *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1957) pp. 59, 65. All further references to this text are from this edition.

timidity with her present self-assertiveness, and her past silence with her move into language. These indicate substantial character changes, not over time but in a symbolic moment that imitates the continuing but disruptive act of interpretation itself.

Thus the reader picks up the traces provided, and with Emma, actively searches through memory and dream work to restore a fractured family romance to its pristine origins. The back and forth dialectic ("recordó") between idealized past and traumatic present has set up expectations for the reader: that what was obscure will come to light, that what was enigmatic will be explained, that what was undecided will be resolved. Such a sense is reinforced by the imagery that describes Emma's initial nocturnal resurrections of her submerged past and the dawning of her new consciousness as a process of painful, but progressive enlightenment.

En la creciente oscuridad, Emma lloró hasta el fin de aquel día el suicido de Manuel Maier, que en los antiguos días felices fué Emmanuel Zunz. Recordó veraneos en una chacra, cerca de Gualeguay, recordó (trató de recordar) a su madre . . . recordó los amarillos losanges de una ventana . . . No durmió aquella noche, y cuando la primera luz definió el rectángulo de la ventana, ya estaba perfecto su plan. (p. 60)

Emma, as lost child now become avenging angel, articulates her hatred of two systems of patriarchal oppression: an economic system whereby male bosses exploit male and female workers and a sexual system whereby men exploit women. Within this economy, the proper name is the mark of private ownership on a life, the only way to identify the owner who may in fact own little else. Daughter of Manuel Maier, who was forced to change his name from Emmanuel Zunz, Emma's name is a derivation of his past identity. She is, therefore, already stigmatized by his shame, and she lives in the secret shadow of his alleged crime. His suicide, the event which changes her status from daughter to orphan, and which marks her rise to female self-consciousness and her assumption of speech, is in her terms, not a single episode with tragic far-reaching implications, but the unifying thread of all past and future experience. "La muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin": the all-encompassing metaphorical sweep of such a statement has the rhetorical effect of becoming a privileged point of reference and of suppressing all other temporal and conceptual distinctions under its signifier "sin fin", in much the same way as the metaphorical pronouncement "ya era la que sería."

Playing on some of the notions of sexual and textual difference that have been described above, this text is a false story which is "substantially" true. Upon this paradox all the text's symmetrical oppositions and parallels, both literal and metaphorical, explicit and inferred, are constructed. As I have suggested, the pervasiveness of this binary system reflects the hierarchical nature of our own sexual politics. By simply formal means, Borges is attempting to fracture our assumptions about truth and falsity, the nature of the literary text and its fidelity to a real world outside the text, and in the process he points at the ideological structures which mirror those very deceptive constructs as well.

Such a technique Borges has certainly used elsewhere, but here the binary structure is so manifest that it is impossible to ignore. Organized as a series of metaphorical associations that are continually undercut by metonymical relations, the text exploits an implicit tension between the absolute and the contingent, between, for example, the imperative of Emma's design and the contingency of its execution, between what has been otherwise called motivated and arbitrary signification. Within this figurative interplay, metaphorizing speaks as/for the totalizing tendency of interpretation, if not as an act of closure asserting shared essences between the objects yoked in the comparison, then at least as a mode of suppressing paradox, contradiction, difference. To discuss metaphor in such terms is to stress not its creative or liberating dimensions or its valorization as the supremely poetic in language, but to call attention to its dominion over other figurative devices. Metaphor involves the perception of a similarity between two otherwise incompatible or unrelated objects of meaning, and in such a way that the sense of conceptual distance is preserved even as the leap of imagination or faith is being made. For the reader of this text these essences are perceived as overriding thematic resemblances, equivalences, substitutions and exchanges between ideas and things, the conceptual and the material, a projection and its actualization, between symbol and discourse.<sup>19</sup>

For example, when Emma furtively hides the letter announcing

<sup>19</sup> That Emma identifies so strongly with her father's name underscores this metaphorical affiliation. Paternity and patrimony are complicitous with power and property in our culture. The "carrying on" of the father's name is an effort towards controlling the potential ambiguity of the relationship between father and offspring. In contrast, the mother/child relation is unequivocal; by emerging from her very body, absolute contiguity between them is established.

her father's death (whose ulterior "knowledge" she already possessed) in a drawer, it has immediate metaphorical significance. She is attempting to repress its message by "putting it out of her mind." Later on, she tears it up before it can be used as the crucial shred of evidence that could potentially identify her act as premeditated murder, rather than self-defense, as she will claim. After her encounter with the sailor, the narrator describes Emma as tearing up the money he left her as before she had torn the letter, though the reasons for doing so are different. The act of tearing the letter (metonymically linked to the photo of one Milton Sills, under which it lies) is associated with tearing the money, which is likened to throwing away bread, both impieties and improprieties committed within the context of a greater "impiedad"—the loss of her innocence.

Of course, the positing of certain governing connections is necessary for narrative continuity of purpose. But to make ideas equal or like suggests a kind of theological design, one that links the order in nature with order in a text. To mediate against this transcendental temptation, Borges displaces the assumed meaning or puts it into question through the use of the contingent and the arbitrary. Metonymy is considered to be literal, referential, everyday language; it undercuts the grand pattern. Emma's narrative, as an effort to diffuse, differentiate, and contextualize meaning is the metonymic insertion of the uncanny and the incredible over and against the logical and the assimilable. The final, inconclusive ending announces the triumph of metonymy and what it stands for as a tool of (feminist?) subversion, as an ironic dissident voice in a chorus of predictable textual responses.

Another way to show the movement from metaphor to metonymy is through the father/daughter alliance. A convention or cultural construction which is based on substitution and analogy, it is posited as original and determining ("la muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin . . . 'He vengado a mi padre y no me podrán castigar' . . ."). But it is eventually effaced in favor of the natural mother/daughter relation, which is based on contiguity, though restored through analogy. ("Pensó [no pudo no pensar] que su padre le había hecho a su madre la cosa horrible que a ella ahora le hacían").<sup>20</sup> Carrying

<sup>20</sup> For the classic presentation of metaphor and metonymy as the fundamental polarity within language, see Roman Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

this thematic point further, metonymy is served at the expense of metaphor only to be metaphorized again in the following example. A profound childhood association is laboriously traced through the labyrinth of Emma's memory:

Recordó (trató de recordar) a su madre . . . recordó la casita de Lanus que les remataron, recordó los amarillos losanges de una ventana . . . recordó (pero eso jamás lo olvidaba) que su padre . . . (p. 60)

This is later explicitly related to the "rape" scene:

El hombre la condujo a una puerta y después a un turbio zaguán y después a una escalera tortuosa y después a un vestíbulo (en el que había una vidriera con losanges idénticos a los de la casa en Lanus). . . . (p. 62)

The binary system is textually transformed by the co-existence of two discourses—the narrator's "true" story and Emma's subsequent narration of the same story, which is embodied in the first—and the engendering of a third multivalent, ambiguous non-synthesis. Neither mutually exclusive nor reducible one to the other, these discourses are perceived as equivalent, symbiotic, and interchangeable. The catalyst, the mediator of this transformation is Emma, who not only transforms the actual conditions of the narrative by taking a "merely" credible story and making it incredible, but who is in the end symbolically and actually transformed by it. Both author and character of her own psycho-drama, both perpetrator and victim in her sexual allegory of Crime and Punishment, Eros and Death, she strives to write a future that will redeem her past.

Within the story time of narrative past and future, where time and space are constantly juxtaposed, two contrasting conceptions of time and temporality are presented. One is in the judicial mode—a metonymic catalogue of characteristically Borgesian particulars—usually irrelevant, precise, repetitious details of location, proper names, dates, hours, and their causal connections, of the sort that Foucault claims is precisely the "distortion of classification":

De vuelta, preparó una sopa de tapioca y unas legumbres, comió temprano, se acostó y se obligó a dormir. Así, laborioso y trivial, pasó el viernes quince, la víspera.

These details serve not as assurances of plausability or verisimilitude, but as ironic subversion, in favor of the metaphorical non-

time of memory, chaos, vertigo, of timelessness, of time outside of time.

. . . Los hechos graves están fuera del tiempo, ya porque en ellos el pasado inmediato queda como tronchado del porvenir, ya porque no parecen consecutivas las partes que los forman.

¿En aquel tiempo fuera del tiempo, en aquel desorden perplejo de sensaciones inconexas y atroces . . . (p. 62).

Borges undermines the concept of authoritarian fictions by establishing a narrator who is partially omniscient; but, he undermines that notion too, by the provocative and intrusive use of “perhaps” in contexts where ostensibly Emma’s deepest psychological motivations are being described. The rhetorical force of repetition is not lost on the reader, who is seduced into deciphering the possible from the probable, and who then begins to realize that such distinctions aren’t even useful.

Referir *con alguna realidad los hechos* de esa tarde sería difícil y quizá impropio. Un atributo de lo infernal es la *irrealidad*, un atributo que parece mitigar sus terrores y que los agrava *tal vez*. ¿Como hacer verosímil la acción en la que casi no creyó quien la ejecutaba, cómo recuperar ese breve caos que hoy la memoria de Emma Zunz repudia y confunde? Emma vivía por Almagro, en la calle Liniers; *nos consta* que esa tarde fue al puerto. Acaso en el infame Paseo de Julio se vió multiplicada en espejos, publicada por luces y desnudada por los ojos hambrientos, *pero más razonable es conjeturar* que al principio erró, inadvertida, por la indiferente recova. . . . (pp. 61, 62) (my emphasis)

Each “perhaps” does not introduce or postulate an either/or choice, or one explanation or interpretation of events or phenomena; nor is this paradox for the sake of digression. Rather it serves the function of rendering an atmosphere of ambivalence that pervades and colors the entire narrative. This ambivalence doesn’t threaten the validity of the narrator, but instead guides the reader in integrating the two discourses by consistently posing alternatives, leaving their traces, and offering new interpretive strategies for these alternatives.

When the narrator says: “Pensó Emma Zunz ‘una sola vez’ en el muerto que motivaba el sacrificio?,” and then responds with “Yo tengo para mi que pensó una vez,” the reader is tempted to chuckle even in this most gruesome of situations. But, then we are immediately transported to the “primal scene” where, in a feminine revision of the child’s search for lost origins, Emma does not wit-

ness but, in fact, re-enacts the moment of parental intercourse, and typically, denies and then represses that knowledge.

... Pensó (no pudo no pensar) que su padre le había hecho a su madre la cosa horrible que a ella ahora le hacían. (pp. 62, 63)

If, "en ese momento peligró su desesperado propósito", it is because she realizes the duplicity of her alliance with her father, and for the first time identifies with her mother as woman. Enervated by that revelation, she is yet empowered by her capacity to perform according to the law she despises:

... fué una herramienta para Emma como ésta lo fué para él, pero ella sirvió para el goce y él para la justicia. (p. 63)

But, lest this abstract equivalence appear too pat even in such an ironic economy, the narrator recounts Emma's visceral response to the horror of her experience:

... El temor se perdió en la tristeza de su cuerpo, en el asco. El asco y la tristeza la encadenaban, pero Emma lentamente se levantó y procedió a vestirse. . . . Paradójicamente su fatiga venía a ser una fuerza, pues la obligaba a concentrarse en los pormenores de la aventura y le ocultaba el fondo y el fin. (p. 63).

Although the murder scene does not proceed either as quickly or as smoothly as planned, by a genial transformation, she inverts the hierarchy:

... Desde la madrugada anterior, ella se había soñado muchas veces, dirigiendo el firme revólver, forzando al miserable a confesar la miserable culpa y exponiendo la intrépida estrategema que permitiría a la Justicia de Dios triunfar de la justicia humana. (No por temor, sino por ser un instrumento de la Justicia, ella no quería ser castigada.) (p. 64)

Now Emma holds the revolver and, therefore, manages to symbolize both phallic power and right, instituting a new order which encompasses both the human and the divine. And thus like the Method Actor who, in order to authentically express the emotions she is representing, looks inside herself for a structurally analogous experience that can evoke or trigger that desired emotional response, Emma realizes that the source and the nature of her rage have been irrevocably transformed. She is no longer able to represent her father; she can only represent herself:

Ante Aaron Loewenthal, más que la urgencia de vengar a su padre, Emma sintió la de castigar el ultraje padecido por ello. No podía no matarlo, después de esa minuciosa deshonra. (p. 64)

The imagery of the murder scene is directly reminiscent of her own sexual violation—"y una efusión de brusca sangre manó de os labios obscenos y manchó la barba y la ropa," and she links the two events for the sake of textual integrity. "He vengado a mi padre y no me podrán castigar . . ."

. . . Luego tomó el teléfono y repitió lo que tantas veces repetiría, con esas y con otras palabras: "*Ha ocurrido una cosa que es increíble . . . El señor Loewenthal me hizo venir con el pretexto de la huelga . . . Abusó de mí, lo maté. . .*" (p. 65)

The following words of the narrator—"actually the story was true"—achieves a double transformation of the two discourses, which are then explicitly stated as equivalent. For the dramatic irony of Emma's discourse is juxtaposed with the rhetorical irony of the narrator's marvelous subsequent explanation:

La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios. (pp. 65, 66)

Emma's story (false story) as incredible, impressed everyone, not as the narrator says, because it was substantially *true*, but because it was more *credible*.

What is true in symbol, if not in fact, determines the formal ending of the story and reveals how fictions are made. The substantial account is that Emma has been violated and that she shot Loewenthal dead. By arranging these two episodes so that one follows from the other, she has, using the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sujet*, constructed the causality of a fiction. The narrative is the fictive mediation between these disjunctions. One represents justice in the normative or ideal world, the other in the real.

Ideals like substance and justice and truth enable us to mediate the disjunctions of life and text. Shame, hate, and outrage do metaphorically and irrevocably link Emma's violation and Loewenthal's death. (In detective's terms, she has given us both motive and justification.) Emma's deconstructive coup, however, is to play one conception of truth against another, to play the absolute against the contingent. And thus, despite our desperate faith in the metaphorical absolute, in the transcendental sanctions of signification, as mimetic interpreters we must, nonetheless, consider the invocation of truth in such a context to be unacceptable. (It



doesn't hold up as evidence.) Here the metonymical details count for everything, they make all the difference; they can not be subsumed under abstract categories of resemblance. Emma's narrative demonstrates the complicity of language and deception, in particular self-deception.

For this is the point at which the feminist and the deconstructionist must diverge. Both will perceive the future of difference as being linked to the kinds of diffusion of meaning carried out by figures of metonymy. Both will support Borges' use of a female subversive. Emma, trying both to reconcile and differentiate the two realms of the absolute and the contingent, the ideal and the real, in a gesture of splendid self-possession, does transcend them. But, at what cost? She *has* written a new text—with her body, just as she has resisted being written into another text without changing the conditions that have governed its writing. But, the feminist will ask, doesn't she, ultimately, like all women, exist only as the possibility of mediation, transaction, and transference between man and himself? Isn't woman in turn metaphorized in this text?

The textual/sexual congruence breaks down because Emma's identity as a woman hinges on more than playing a role she believes she has constructed. Ultimately revealed through this non-congruence is the discontinuity between the text as project and the experience of the subject, the relation between a fractured subject and a divided text. No matter how radical a textual practice that strives to break out of the binary mode, given the constraints of language, it must remain a metaphorical formulation. Certainly a modernist can no longer defer (even in bad conscience) to isms which elegeize the unitary or stop at the binary. We have already arrived at a new mode of signification. But, it too, as a figure of the mind, may be only a figure of speech. The mode itself has become a figure of multiple interpretation: out of its (closet) repertory of images comes Woman. She no longer represents herself or other selves, because we can no longer guarantee that such a notion of the self can be represented. And so she becomes a free-floating signifier of both specificity and difference when that furthers a theoretical strategy, and of multiplicity when another is at stake. And so the cycle of metaphorizing is not broken.

The provocative connections between "textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psycho-sexual identity and cultural authority"<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, "What do Feminists Want?; or A Postcard From the Volcano," *ADE Bulletin* (Winter 1980), p. 19.

are even made manifest in one of Borges' dense, enigmatic fictions. A deconstructive reading of "Emma Zunz" applauds her decision to assume the language of phallic discourse only to cast it aside with impunity after it has served her purpose. Certainly one part of the message or theme reinforces that. But, the *subject* is a woman; and Emma's virtuoso performance, though a victory, only reinscribes her (as she would say "sin fin") into the system of logic she so valiantly strives to transform. For the crucial question remains implicated in gender difference, not in symbol, but in fact. Could this story *be* if Emma were a man?

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