

DECEPTION OR SELF-DECEPTION?
THE ESSENTIAL AMBIGUITY OF BORGES'
"EMMA ZUNZ"

"Emma Zunz" stands apart from other *cuentos* by Borges in having a female protagonist, and appears at first sight to differ also in telling what is essentially a story of success rather than — as is so common in Borges — one of failure and frustration. The usual critical approach to "Emma Zunz" is to see it as describing how a Jewish girl from Buenos Aires learns that her father, Emanuel Zunz, has committed suicide in lonely exile in Brazil after serving a prison sentence for a robbery of which he was innocent, the true culprit being Aarón Loewenthal, Emma's present employer. Resolving to punish Loewenthal and avenge her father, yet not wishing to go to prison herself, Emma — who, significantly, works in a "fábrica de tejidos" — weaves an ingenious plot. She sacrifices her virginity, posing as a prostitute and giving herself to a Scandinavian sailor whose ship is to leave harbour in a few hours; next she visits Loewenthal on a pretext, shoots him with the pistol she knows he keeps in a drawer, and then telephones the police to inform them that "*ha ocurrido una cosa que es increíble. . . El señor Loewenthal me hizo venir con el pretexto de la huelga. . . Abusó de mí, lo maté. . .*"¹ There follows a familiar Borgesian situation, exemplifying man's tendency to interpret reality incorrectly: in a reversal of the usual ending of a crime story, the police are deceived, though not it seems by a criminal proper as in "La muerte y la brújula", for Emma has apparently been an instrument of divine or poetic justice, punishing a wrongdoer with whom human justice had failed to deal:

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. (65-6)

Emma's plan does not, of course, turn out absolutely as she had intended it to: the encounter with the sailor is a horrific experience for her, and Emma cannot but think that "su padre le había hecho a su madre la cosa horrible que a ella ahora le hacían" (62-3). This is clearly very ironical as her memories of her late mother had until then been vague and it was with her father, after whom she had been named, that Emma had sympathised and identified. As she kills Loewenthal there is thus some confusion of motive: Emma is punishing a man for what another man has done to her, and her victim dies, not so much for the crime he is believed to have committed as for an offence of which he is innocent: "Ante Aarón 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" (64). In addition, she fails to kill Loewenthal with a single bullet as she had planned, and has to shoot him three times; she is unable also to denounce him and force him to confess before squeezing the trigger. However, her disgust resulting from the loss of her virginity, though leading her to despatch Loewenthal in a hasty and unsatisfactory manner, gives a greater air of conviction to her assertion that he had raped her ("Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio" [65-6]), and at the end of the story it is possible to see her as having on the whole carried out her plan successfully: Loewenthal is dead, her father is avenged, and Emma has got off scot-free, since the unwitting accomplice who alone could prove her story false is by now far out to sea on the *Nordstjärnan*.

Such, then, is the usual interpretation of "Emma Zunz" as the story of a successful quest for vengeance and poetic justice. Critics concur in seeing Emma as an intelligent if strange woman with right on her side, and Loewenthal as a criminal whose fate is largely merited. Ronald Christ, for instance, calls Emma's plan "brilliantly contrived",² while for Harss, "Emma, resuelta a vengarse del culpable, traza un plan que después lleva a cabo fríamente, con la rigurosa precisión del autómatas".³ Wheelock states that Emma takes revenge "in her own name and right upon the man who stole money and caused her father to be accused and exiled and finally to commit suicide";⁴ for Alazraki, "'Emma Zunz' es la historia de una venganza", even though "el primer motivo que impulsa a Emma a esa venganza cede a un motivo ulterior que emerge del relato como un inesperado doble fondo". Alazraki is clear that although her method involves undergoing "un oprobio no menos terrible que el sufrido por su padre", Emma does carry out an "acto de justicia".⁵ According to Sturrock, "Emma Zunz . . . avenges the death of her father (which is in fact suicide) by murdering her employer. . . She . . . will frame Loewenthal just as he framed her father."⁶

The above views offer a perfectly valid interpretation of "Emma Zunz" from which I would not wish to dissent in any way. However, I feel that this is not the only possible approach to the story, and I intend to demonstrate that, as with "El Sur", we are faced with a *cuento* which is complex rather than simple in its narrative structure, and in which various readings of equal validity coexist.⁷ "Emma Zunz" no more admits of a single "correct" interpretation than does life itself, and may thus be taken as a convenient symbol of the ambiguous nature of reality as it appears to Borges.

In "Emma Zunz" Borges employs one of his favourite motifs, that of the search or quest; this takes different forms in his *cuentos*, but one should note that frequently the fulfilment of the quest is accompanied by a circumstance which completely negates the achievement, so that success is linked with disaster. In "El Sur", for instance, Dahlmann defines his personality as that of a man of courage and a "true" Argentine, yet this is offset by the possibility that he does so only at the moment of his death, whether in

hospital or actually in a knife-fight with a *compadrito*. Hladik in "El milagro secreto" completes his literary masterpiece in his mind and a split second later is executed by the firing-squad; the narrator of "El inmortal" achieves his goal of eternal life on earth only to find that it degenerates into infinite tedium; the wizard in "Las ruinas circulares" triumphantly creates a phantom to serve his god, yet learns with horror soon afterwards that he too is a phantom, an unreal creature existing only as another's dream; in "La casa de Asterión" the Minotaur at last encounters his longed-for liberator and redeemer Theseus, and immediately meets with death at his hands. [This motif of what I would call the "worthless success" occurs in two other *cuéntos* which, like "Emma Zunz", have links with the detective thriller: in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" Yu Tsün evolves an ingenious means of informing Berlin that the British ammunition dump is at Albert, yet his method involves shooting the innocent scholar who has explained Yu Tsün's old family mystery, and leads to his own execution; the sinologist Stephen Albert brilliantly solves the riddle of Tsui Pên's maze-novel, and is at once murdered, while Madden the counter-intelligence officer apprehends Yu Tsün a few seconds too late to prevent him killing Albert; Yu Tsün's success, it might be added, brings about the bombardment of the ammunition dump, but the result — a mere five days' delay to the British offensive — hardly justifies his death or that of Albert. Likewise Lönnrot, the over-intellectual detective of "La muerte y la brújula", cleverly tracks down his mysterious quarry, yet his triumph is empty since he has in fact merely been following a trail of clues planted for him by his enemy Scharlach, a trail that leads him into a fatal trap.

Faced with such examples as these, one cannot exclude the possibility that Emma's plan may also be both successful and yet totally valueless, that she has sacrificed her virginity, shot Loewenthal and fooled the police to no purpose, failing to achieve the vengeance and justice which she desired. Her stratagem may conceivably involve faults far more serious and fundamental than the minor flaws of her momentarily forgetting her father as she kills Loewenthal, and mismanaging certain details of his "execution"; at several points in the story we do indeed find suggestions that possibly (but only possibly) Emma not only deceives the authorities at the end of the story but has been deceiving herself from the very start, her self-deception taking the form of believing firstly that her father was innocent and Loewenthal guilty, and then that her father's death was really suicide.

There is, after all, no reason why Emma Zunz should be any less prone than the police — or the rest of mankind — to misunderstand reality and act upon false assumptions, and reminders of the essentially misleading nature of life abound throughout the story: Emma herself seems to be nervous of men and to have a mild, gentle personality, yet she turns out to be capable of giving her body to a stranger and shooting her employer in cold blood; Loewenthal is deceived by her false assertion that she wishes to visit him to give information about a strike at the factory, and the sailor from the

Nordstjärnan takes Emma to be a prostitute although she is not.⁸ Loewenthal himself, his eyes concealed behind dark glasses, is like Emma an ambiguous, not to say a hypocritical character: "era, para todos, un hombre serio; para sus pocos íntimos, un avaro" (63); he has recently mourned "con decoro" the death of his wife, "pero el dinero era su verdadera pasión" (64). Here and elsewhere — as when the shooting does not go quite as Emma foresaw it — [the reader is alerted to the possibilities of error and confusion which can affect everything in life, however trivial.] Even the simple business of giving one's name can involve a misunderstanding, as Emma discovers when she enrolls at the sports club: "tuvo que repetir y deletrear su nombre y su apellido, tuvo que festejar las bromas vulgares que comentan la revisión" (60).

The opening sentence of "Emma Zunz", with its date and personal names and other details, is misleadingly clear and precise: "El catorce de enero de 1922, Emma Zunz, al volver de la fábrica de tejidos Tarbuch y Loewenthal, halló en el fondo del zaguán una carta, fechada en el Brasil, por la que supo que su padre había muerto" (59). The remainder of the paragraph, however, creates a mood of vagueness and uncertainty:⁹ Emma is confused by the appearance of the letter — the stamp and type of envelope are no doubt familiar from letters she has received from her father in Brazil, but "la inquietó la letra desconocida" (59). The letter is described rather imprecisely as comprising "nueve o diez líneas borroneadas" (59), and informs her that her father (who has taken a false identity and is known as Maier), has died of an *accidental* overdose: "había ingerido por error una fuerte dosis de veronal" (59). The letter comes from a fellow-resident of her father's *pensión*, but Emma cannot determine whether his name is Fein or Fain; either spelling suffices, of course, to suggest the English word "feign", with its implications of fiction, inauthenticity and deception. Fein/Fain himself does not know that his letter to "Maier"'s family will in fact go to the dead man's daughter: "no podía saber que se dirigía a la hija del muerto" (59).

What does emerge from the opening paragraph is that Emma is explicitly informed that her father's death was accidental; she has naturally no means of verifying this, and various interpretations of the statement are possible: it might be absolutely true, or her father could have killed himself deliberately while contriving the circumstances in such a way as to mislead — just as Emma does later over Loewenthal's death; again, he could simply have taken his life without intending to give the impression of accidental death which others received; it is conceivable also that his death was obviously suicide but that the authorities (or simply Fein/Fain) invented the accidental overdose in order to spare the relatives from suffering too much. Despite what the letter actually says, Emma for her part concludes that her father has really committed suicide — "lloró hasta el fin de aquel día el suicidio de Manuel Maier que en antiguos días felices fué Emanuel Zunz" (60) — but the reader must surely bear in mind the possibility that she is mistaken.

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Significantly, perhaps, as Emma sits weeping and brooding on her father's death, darkness is gathering around her.

We now learn that six years previously her father, jailed for theft, had sworn to Emma that he was innocent and that the thief was really Loewenthal. Emma, then a child of twelve, had no way of checking this accusation, but she apparently believed it just as she now chooses — once again without definite proof — to disbelieve the statement that her father had died accidentally. Like the letter, this accusation against Loewenthal can be interpreted in more than one way: Emma's father could be telling the truth, of course, but he could equally well be lying, trying to put blame on an innocent man as his daughter does more spectacularly later, when she frames Loewenthal for her "rape"; Loewenthal would thus be doubly innocent, innocent of rape but innocent also of the theft for which Emma decides that he must die — one must remember that Emma does not in fact denounce him and extract from him a confession as she had planned, so that there is no actual confirmation of his alleged guilt. There is also the possibility that Emanuel Zunz is innocent, but mistaken as to the identity of the real thief, sincerely accusing Loewenthal when the culprit is in fact an unknown third party — there seems no reason why Emanuel Zunz should be less capable of misinterpreting a situation than so many other characters in Borges' work, including Emma herself.

It is possible to see Emma Zunz as successfully carrying out a plan to punish a criminal and avenge an innocent man wrongly condemned and driven to suicide, but it is equally conceivable that her actions are based upon mistaken assumptions which lead to a pointless sacrifice of her honour and the shameful death of an elderly man guilty of no crime save avarice. This interpretation would be supported by Borges' use of ambiguous language when he tells us that the fact that "Loewenthal no sabía que ella sabía" gives Emma a "sentimiento de poder" (60); Emma's reflexion later that her plan will enable her to enjoy "el sabor de la victoria y de la justicia" (61),¹⁰ is another hint that her apparent triumph may be completely illusory.

This *cuento* is thus more complex than has generally been supposed, and it is complicated further by the fact that it is not possible to be certain that Emma is totally convinced of her father's innocence and Loewenthal's guilt. She might be convinced, but one must note that she tells nobody of her father's accusation, not even her best friend; one reason could be that "quizá creía que el secreto era un vínculo entre ella y el ausente", but another is that "quizá rehuía la profana incredulidad" (60), which could imply that she herself has some doubt as to the truth of her father's statement. In this context one might see as significant the remark by the narrator that Emma's encounter with the sailor and her killing of Loewenthal were "una acción en la que casi no creyó quien la ejecutaba" and constituted a "breve caos que hoy la memoria de Emma Zunz repudia y confunde" (62).

Emma is less than convinced by her father's protestation of innocence

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and denunciation of Loewenthal, then her motives become less altruistic, and her plan involves a degree of play-acting more extensive than the pretence needed to get an interview with Loewenthal, to pass herself off as a prostitute and to trick the police. Consciously or unconsciously, Emma could be a kind of Quixote-figure, reacting against the tedium of her prosaic life characterised by routine work in a factory, insipid meals ("preparó una sopa de tapioca y unas legumbres" [61]), and an absence of excitement and romance ("luego, se habló de novios y nadie esperó que Emma hablara" [60-1]). That Emma, like Dahlmann in "El Sur", hankers after excitement and romance is suggested by her interest in the cinema ("con Elsa y con la menor de las Kronfuss discutió a qué cinematógrafo irían el domingo a la tarde" [60]), and her possession of a picture of the silent-film hero Milton Sills which she keeps in her bedroom chest of drawers (61).¹¹ Without wholly believing in them, Emma might then be seizing upon her father's alleged innocence and possible suicide as pretexts which permit her to break out of the monotony of her daily life and be like a screen heroine; she turns out indeed to be a remarkable natural actress, and the apparently innocuous "recogió el papel" (59) describing her bending to pick up the letter she has dropped, might imply her acceptance of the role she has been offered, a role which will permit her to adopt a new, more forceful personality: "ya era la que sería" (59).

There is thus much more to "Emma Zunz" than the comparatively straightforward story of a shy girl who nerves herself to punish a criminal and avenge the suicide of her wronged father. This is certainly one possible reading, but it is by no means the only one, and Emma's motives remain unclear as do the facts of her father's death, his alleged innocence, Loewenthal's alleged guilt, and indeed many aspects of this *cuento* in which the reader must often conclude — like Emma when Loewenthal's death fails to go as expected — that perhaps "las cosas no ocurrieron así" (64). Not even the reported details of the encounter with the sailor or of the shooting of Loewenthal can be considered wholly reliable: the narrator admits that "referir con alguna realidad los hechos de esa tarde sería difícil y quizá improcedente" (61), and is unsure of his ability to relate convincingly "una acción en la que casi no creyó quien la ejecutaba . . . ese breve caos que hoy la memoria de Emma Zunz repudia y confunde" (62). The episode with the sailor is described merely as a "desorden perplejo de sensaciones inconexas y atroces" (62), and the circumstances leading up to it are vague. The narrator is able to state with confidence only that Emma "vivía por Almagro; en la calle Liniers" and that "nos consta que esa tarde fué al puerto" (62); after that, we have hesitation and uncertainty:

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. . . Entró en dos o tres bares, vió la rutina o los manejos de otras mujeres. (62)

Emma certainly manages to meet sailors from the *Nordstjärnan* which she has learned is to sail in a few hours, but the details of the meeting are not wholly clear: "de uno, muy joven, temió que le inspirara alguna ternura y optó por otro, quizá más bajo que ella y grosero, para que la pureza del horror no fuera mitigada" (62); the nationality of the sailor is as uncertain as his appearance, since he could be either a Swede or a Finn (63).

Like many other *cuentos* by Borges, "Emma Zunz" is concerned with the difficulty of understanding reality and of even describing it, and the issues of deceit, self-deception, confusion and inauthenticity are fundamental to the entire story from start to finish and do not emerge solely from the deception of the police in the concluding paragraph as Sturrock, for instance, suggests.¹² Emma has either punished a criminal or killed an innocent man; there is no way of telling for sure. She may have acted upon premises that are quite correct or utterly and disastrously mistaken; she may be motivated by a sincere wish to avenge her father (whether or not he was actually blameless and really did commit suicide), or she may be obeying more complex yearnings, perhaps not fully conscious, for escape from a dull life and for a taste of excitement and notoriety. What is certain is that the fascination of this story is much diminished if we see it as having only one possible interpretation; Borges' readers — like so many of his characters, including Emma Zunz herself — need always to beware of imposing a single, simple explanation upon something essentially baffling, multilayered and problematical.¹³

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¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph*, seventh edition (Buenos Aires, 1967), p. 65. Subsequent page references are given in the text of this article.

² R. J. Christ, *The Narrow Art. Borges' Art of Illusion* (New York-London, 1969), p. 60.

³ Luis Harss, *Los nuestros*, second edition (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 167. In fact Emma's plan is not quite as well executed as Harss suggests (see above).

⁴ C. Wheelock, *The Mythmaker. A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (Austin-London, 1969), p. 139.

⁵ J. Alazraki, *Versiones, inversiones, reversiones. El espejo como modelo estructural del relato en los cuentos de Borges* (Madrid, 1977), pp. 64, 65. With regard to the question of reversal of roles, incidentally, it may (or may not) be relevant that Emma's surname, if written in lower-case letters, reads the same whether upside down or the right way up.

⁶ J. Sturrock, *Paper Tigers. The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 68, 69. See also pp. 185-7.

⁷ For the multiple structure of "El Sur", see for instance J. B. Hall, "Borges' 'El Sur': a jardín de senderos que se bifurcan", *Iberoromania* 3 (1975), 71-7.

⁸ It might be added that prostitution, involving as it does the appearance of love but not the reality of it, is itself an ambiguous activity.

⁹ A similar way of establishing a mood of confusion and uncertainty is found at the opening of "La muerte y la brújula": the hotel where Yarmolinsky is murdered overlooks a river estuary whose waters are, paradoxically, yellow as desert sand. The hotel itself has features in common with a sanatorium, a prison and a brothel.

¹⁰ The italics are mine in each case.

¹¹ If Emma's notions of love are idealised and romanticised this would of course make her experience with the sailor even more horrifying.

¹² According to Sturrock, "the real outrage of 'Emma Zunz' is perpetrated, on the strength of this casual conclusion, against that unadventurous empiricism whose criterion of the truth is a correspondence with the circumstantial evidence. Borges's Idealism recognises no such criterion" (op. cit., p. 69). The point is well put, but it is the entire story which is a criticism of "unadventurous empiricism", not just its final lines.

¹³ I am grateful to Mr R. S. Mills of University College, Aberystwyth, for his helpful comments on the first draft of this article.