

True Lies

True Lies: Metaphysical games in Borges' "Emma Zunz"

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## ABSTRACT

Jorge Luis Borges, literary genius of fiction, poetry, and criticism, is a mastermind at metaphysical games. In a tape-recorded interview with Robert Alifano in 1981 he makes known that he “discovered the labyrinth in a book published in France by Garnier that [his] father had in his library. . . . That labyrinth was . . . a symbol of being lost in life. [He believed] that all of us, at one time or another, have felt that we are lost, and . . . saw in the labyrinth the symbol of that condition” (Charters, 1438). Borges extends his fascination for labyrinths and other puzzles to his works. He prides himself on manipulating or “losing” his readers in his complex tales full of irony and psychological puzzles. “Emma Zunz” is no exception. It is the story of a young woman avenging the wrongs done to her father which may have led to his suicide. In “Emma Zunz” Borges toys with the ideas of justice and revenge, and of right and wrong. Many interpretations are offered for this work of genius; Borges may well be the only holder of the key to understanding it completely.

There exists an interesting theory that in life we are what we experience: who we are, and what we do and accomplish, stems directly from what we have encountered earlier. We simply go through life jumbling up and spitting back out in a different order

components and conglomerates of those components of that with which we have come into contact.

Jorge Luis Borges held similar ideas about writing. *“Wondering if he had ever created a single original line in his writing, Borges said that if the reader looks long enough, a source might be found for everything he wrote. To him invention was just ‘mixing up memories. I don’t think we’re capable of creation in the way that God created the world’”(Charters, 169).* Borges was in agreement with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s idea that *“all literary works are one work and that all writers are one impersonal writer.”*

Borges, the literary genius of fiction, poetry, and criticism, was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1899. After being educated in Europe, he would rise to become one of the most influential artists of a generation of postmodernist writers. *“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”* (Brodzki, 330). But along with influencing others, he himself was influenced by many factors in his world. There existed numerous backdrops in Borges’ life, which provide for various perspectives and interpretations of his works and their elements. A plethora of these influences is revealed in each of his telling tales.

*“Emma Zunz”* is one such work that brings to light many constituents of Borges’ surrounding environment. But little attention is given to this work in comparison to others to which it is equally complex.

Borges himself did not consider it his own effort. “In a conversation with Antonio Carrizo, Borges said: ‘This story was a gift of Cecilia Ingenieros. She gave me the plot, which I do not like . . . I dedicated it to Cecilia, . . . rather than dedicate it, I should say that I returned it to Cecilia. She made up the plot’” (Woskoboinik, 103).

The Borges Collection at the University of Texas at Austin contains the “Typescript draft of the short story ‘Emma Zunz,’ with a signed and dated postcard to Cecilia Ingenieros” (Wall, 1). It is a “double-spaced typescript on five folio leaves [that] exhibits several autograph corrections and revisions. In a two-line autograph note at the top of the verso of page 5 addressed to ‘Cecilia’ and signed ‘Borges,’ Borges identifies the typescript as ‘el primer borrador de Emma Zunz’ and parenthetically suggests ‘El castigo’ as an alternate title.”

The story was first seen published in *Sur* in September of the year 1948. The following year it appeared in *El Aleph*, Borges’ fourth collection of short stories. “‘Emma Zunz’, perhaps Borges’ least characteristic work, is his only story whose protagonist is a woman” (Brodzki, 331).

“‘Emma Zunz’ and many others from Borges . . . are stories about imagination, the way we think—stories about the art of fiction” (Lindstrom, 140). This may have come out of the fact that Jorge’s father was a university professor of psychology. He “amused him in childhood with various philosophical puzzles that continued to intrigue Borges when he grew up” (Charters, 169). ‘Emma Zunz’ is found in a collection of short stories by Borges entitled *Labyrinths*, which are a puzzle or idea that frequently emerge in Borges’ works. In a tape-recorded interview with Robert Alifano in 1981 he makes known that he “discovered the labyrinth in a book published in France by Garnier that

[his] father had in his library. . . . That labyrinth was . . . a symbol of being lost in life. [He believed] that all of us, at one time or another, have felt that we are lost, and . . . saw in the labyrinth the symbol of that condition” (Charters, 1438).

In “‘She was unable not to think’: Borges’ ‘Emma Zunz’ and the Female Subject,” Brodzki says that “figuration and irony loom large in [the story] as they do in all of Borges’ writing” (336). It is an account of the seeking of a path of revenge mentally and emotionally through a maze of lies, anger, and hurt, and then following through in the flesh. It is “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” (331).

The story begins when 19-year-old Emma receives a letter upon “[returning] home from the Tarbuch and Loewenthal textile mills on the 14th of January, 1922, . . . which informed her that her father had died” (Yates, 132). A corporate boss had covered up his crime of embezzlement by framing Emma’s 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” (Brodzki, 336). Emma then “wept until the end of that day for the suicide of Manuel Maier, who in the old happy days was Emmanuel Zunz” (Yates, 132).

Names have much significance in ‘Emma Zunz,’ as they do in many of Borges’ works. The name Emma Zunz is of Jewish origin. There existed a Jewish colony in Buenos Aires that “in the baroque architecture of Latin [America, inhabited] the basement” (Stavans, “Talia in heaven,” 2). For five hundred years they had “been forced to convert to Christianity or to somehow mask or feel ashamed of their ancestral faith.”

The Jewish body now commends Borges for “Emma Zunz,” which they call “a description of a theodicy where a young Jewish woman takes revenge against the perpetrator of her father’s death” (Stavans, “Jewish Issues,” 1). They rant, “To such a degree were ethnic voices left in the margin that readers today know much more about Brazilian and Argentine Jews thanks to Borges’s short stories, ‘Emma Zunz’ and ‘The Secret Miracle’ . . .” (Stavans, “Talia in heaven,” 2).

Borges himself says, “‘Emma Zunz.’ I purposefully chose a Jewish surname so the reader would accept this story which is somewhat strange; so the reader might think, ‘Well, these things might happen among Jews.’ If I had named her López, the reader wouldn’t have accepted the story” (Woscoboinik, 106). It was known through Argentina that Jews were at the bottom of the social totem pole, and that young, female Jews often prostituted themselves on the streets of Buenos Aires. It’s also possible that the Jewish element of the story came from the fact that Kafka, who was in his prime when Borges was just beginning, was of Jewish decent.

“Emma’s father Emmanuel Zunz (MM, ZZ) changes his name to Manuel Maier (MM) after being ruined by Aaron (AA) Loewenthal. Emma’s MM puts her in the middle between A and Z, where her father was when he killed himself. However these letters may be fitted in, they at least point in the ideality of the whole scheme of background logic” (Lindstrom, 139).

“[The] letters of the Hebrew alphabet have symbolic and semantic connotations, with two orders of meaning, standard and Caballistic, corresponding to the Tarot images. For instance, the letter Aleph is equivalent to the numeral value of 1 and also represents will, man, the magician. In alchemy, Aleph is the beginning of everything”

(Woscoboinik, 114). Aaron Loewenthal thus represents the top of the corporate ladder, as his name begins with “A.”

“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. . . .

Daughter of Manuel Maier, who was forced to change his name from Emmanuel Zunz, Emma’s name is a derivation of his past identity” (Brodzki, 339). She therefore inherits his shame, “and she lives in the shadow of his alleged crime.”

“Zunz” is “a quasipalindrome, with ‘un’ (Spanish for ‘one’) between the two z’s” (Woscoboinik, 116). “One often symbolizes being, the manifestation of the essential. . . . Some view the One as Everything and Nothing (a title that Borges gives to one of his stories)” (115). After his death, Emma became an orphan, all by herself, one. Her crime would become one with her self-inflicted dishonor, the feeling of shame from the prostitution blending with her father’s shame into one act of revenge.

After acting nonchalantly with her female friends the day after the letter arrived, Emma went downtown, “to the waterfront. Perhaps on the infamous Paseo de Julio . . . she wandered, . . . She entered two or three bars, noted the routine or technique of the other woman. Finally she came across men from the *Nordstjärnan*. One of them, very young, she feared might inspire some tenderness in her and she chose instead another, perhaps shorter than she and more coarse, in order that the purity of the horror might not be mitigated” (Yates, 134). She needs a specific kind of man for the job. “Emma has deliberately selected one who will not draw from her an empathetic response” (Lindstrom, 68).

“He was a tool for Emma, as she was for him, but she served him for pleasure whereas he served her for justice” (Yates, 135). He would provide her with the shame she needed to carry out her scheme. “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” (Brodzki, 347). After the deed is done, she tears up the money left by the sailor man as she had torn up the letter concerning her father’s death, “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” (Brodzki, 341).

The gun she uses to kill Loewenthal is also a phallic symbol that coincides with her act of prostitution. “He lived above the factory, alone. Situated in the barren outskirts of the town, he feared thieves; in the patio of the factory there was a large dog and in the drawer of his desk, everyone knew, a revolver” (Yates, 135). She enters through the iron gate, and detours around the chained, barking dog, rehearsing her lines. Once inside, “[she] managed to have Loewenthal leave to get a glass of water for her. When the former, unconvinced by such a fuss but indulgent, returned from the dining room, Emma had already taken the heavy revolver out of the drawer” (Yates, 136). “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” (Brodzki, 344).

“In Aaron Loewenthal’s presence, more than the urgency of avenging her father, Emma felt the need of inflicting punishment of the outrage she had suffered. She was unable not to kill him after that thorough dishonor” (Yates, 136). Emma was now wreaking vengeance for her own shame, rather than that of her father. The two situations had now become fused into one.

Here “[the use of the analogy between Christ and the literary text as a background metaphor makes it a shadowy criterion of logic which . . . substitutes for objective reality as it is laboriously simulated in realism” (Lindstrom, 139). Just as Christ was our substitute, sacrificing his body on the cross for our sins, she had sacrificed her body in the name of “private justice for offenses against honor” (Ludmer, 148). “Emma, in order to achieve her goal, must first have sexual intercourse with a stranger, to her profound disgust. The story never tells us that she wanted clinical evidence of the sexual abuse she would later allege against the murdered Loewenthal, and no detail suggests it, nor is there any hint that she needed to feel outraged in order to pull the trigger. . . .” (Lindstrom, 139). Emma was taking upon herself her father’s shame, just as Christ took upon himself our sin and shame. “Emma’s father is a dishonored person, and to kill in his name . . . Emma must also be a dishonored person. Once she enters her father’s archetypal class, Emma *is* her father . . . Emma is avenging not this or that dishonour . . . but dishonour itself” (Lindstrom, 139).

There was no turning back now. “Emma squeezed the trigger twice. The large body collapsed as if the reports and the smoke had shattered it, the glass of water smashed . . .” (Yates, 136). She had done it. She had achieved divine justice, where human justice lacked.

Corruption of the state is another backdrop and influence in Borges' works and many others' in his place and time, including Roberto Payro, Roberto Arlt, Jose Bianco, Ernesto Sabato, Beatriz Guido, Rodolfo Walsh, and non-Argentineans Augusto Roa Bastos and Garcia Marquez (Ludmer, 143). "The Argentine narrative as *corpus delicti* presents crime as a means by which the state shows its power. The literary body of evidence also [reveals] the lack of state justice, and how such lack results in a farce, a parody of truth" (Ludmer, 141). Corruption of the state led to people taking matters into their own hands. The working class was the main glutton for punishment of the state. The literature stemming from this pressure conveys this: "in the fictions of social realism the subjectivities of the working-class victims, and not those of the criminal bosses, do the speaking" (Ludmer, 143). Other characteristics of these tales of crime and "Justice of God" (Yates, 136) include the fact that the victim is never a mother, that the story is told at least partially from the point of view of the criminal, that the criminal is unnamed or referred to by nickname or shortened name (Emma is short for Emmanuel, her father's name), and that the criminal or "chronicler" reveals the truth about the crime to the reader (Ludmer, 143-146).

Also, "[in] the *corpus* the criminal does not receive punishment (or 'justice') by the state for his crime" (Ludmer, 148). This is the case in 'Emma Zunz': Emma's story is believed. "[The] story *was* incredible, but it impressed everyone because substantially it was true. True was Emma Zunz' tone, true was her shame, true was her hate. True also was the outrage she had suffered: only the circumstances were false, the time, and one or two proper names" (Yates, 137). These words "[achieve] a double transformation of the two discourses, which are then explicitly stated as equivalent" (Brodzki, 345).

What exactly was Borges trying to communicate through “Emma Zunz”? Was he making a feminist statement against the latino machismo? In the end it appears that Emma’s final product was not so much a victory over a man that had done her father, and therefore *her*, an injustice. After all, “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?” (Brodzki, 346). It seems her subjection and self-defilement is more a loss than a victory from a feminist standpoint. “Emma’s narrative demonstrates the complicity of language and deception, in particular self-deception” (Brodzki, 346). Then, was it a blow against the corruption of the state, as she climbed the stairs to Loewenthal’s suite *above* the factory, and rose above him in his death? Or maybe it was merely a remark about the suppression of the Jewish community, in particular the Jewish woman.

Or perhaps Borges’ intention was something entirely different than to reveal the revenge of a suppressed female, a suppressed working class, or a suppressed Jew. Maybe Borges’ intended to convey that Emma Zunz had the same idea as Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Maybe Emma was only trying to commit the perfect crime! She had the setup: the perfect motive and the perfect sitting-duck victim. She covered her tracks nicely, tearing up the heart-breaking letter, which might reveal her motive, and the money paid her by her client. She allowed herself to be used sexually in order to have the “[shame], hate, and outrage [that] metaphorically and irrevocably link Emma’s violation and Loewenthal’s death. (In detective’s terms, she has given us both motive and justification.)” (Brodzki, 345).

Rereading and discussing the story and Borges' frame of mind with others leads me to see the story in an entirely altered light. Borges, exceptionally well-read and tremendously complex, was very keen on irony and metaphysical games. I have begun to believe "Emma Zunz" was just that: a game. In the story, Borges plays with the ideas of justice and revenge and their difference (or is there any?) He also toys with the reader, leading them to take the side of the criminal, who is Emma herself.

We are told that Loewenthal lies and wrongs Emma's father, which may or may not be true, as it is coming from her perspective. But Emma lies, murders, and commits sex crimes in order to avenge the injustice done to her father. Do four wrongs make a right? Yet Borges manipulates us into taking her side through the form in which he tells the story. The facts of the matter are all presented—her wrongs are not lightened—but the reader still roots for her. In the end, she kills because she is appalled at what she has done, rather than for what was done to her father: "In Aaron Loewenthal's presence, more than the urgency of avenging her father, Emma felt the need of inflicting punishment for the outrage she had suffered. She was unable not to kill him after the outrage she has suffered" (Yates, 136). Ironically, she never gets the chance to tell Loewenthal *why*, but instead shoots him before finishing "the accusation she had prepared," defeating the entire purpose. "She never knew if he managed to understand" (137).

Borges continues to play with the reader through the end, where he says that the story was "substantially" true; that "only the circumstances were false, the time, and one or two proper names" (Yates, 137). Just as Borges claims of his works, that "*a source might be found for everything he wrote,*" there was also a source for each element in

Emma's story that made it true to an extent, when presented in an exclusive Borges manner. There was a source for her tone, a source for her shame, and a source for her hate. The story was true, merely a few facts were jumbled up and spit back out in a different order.

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