

TRACES OF THE *THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS* IN BORGES



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“**L**os siglos pasan y la gente sigue escuchando la voz de *Shaharazad*”: The centuries go by, and we are still hearing the voice of Scheherazade. With this simple sentence Borges pays tribute to the enduring impact of *The Arabian Nights* in shaping our present Western culture. Elsewhere, in *Seven Nights* (and we read this title more pointedly in the context of this discussion) he states provocatively that we do not need to have read “this vast book” to be influenced by it, for “it is part of our memory”. What appears to be no more than an elegant throwaway line is actually quite a powerful statement: as ever, Borges is questioning monolithic concepts by disturbing accepted connotations regarding East and West, and opening up a debate about acculturation and transculturation in words that predate that terminology. He refers to the *Nights* as “a vast dream of Islam that invaded the West”, dismantling in its wake the edifice of the rationalist rhetoric of Boileau and clearing the path for Romanticism to sweep over Europe. In his words, the Romantic Movement began when someone, in Normandy or in Paris, read Galland’s translation of *The Thousand and*

One Nights (*Seven* 46-55).¹ For Borges, the *Nights* are not so much an exotic other as a constitutive component of our culture.

The underlying preoccupation of this article is to examine narrative transformations of stories across historical and geographical barriers, addressing questions such as how do stories change in their travel from one culture to another, from one era to another and from one medium to another?²

Our literature continues to bear the traces of the *Nights*, and in what follows I shall address some aspects of the presence of the *Nights* in Borges. Borges continually uses the *Nights* in his ironic stance against categories, asking "What are all the Nights of Scheherazade next to an argument of Berkeley", or commenting that Scheherazade is "less inventive than Allah", thus deliberately conjoining fiction with philosophy and religion (*Seven* 57; *Memorioso* 11, respectively).

As is perhaps too well known, Borges started reading Burton's translation in secret as a young child ("Autobiographical" 209)³; he has since studied most of the principal translations and written on their comparative merits and demerits with recognised insight.⁴ His essay "The Translators of the One Thousand and One Nights" discusses a number of different versions of the *Nights* addressing the highly relevant question of how fiction shapes ideologies and ideology fiction. Although the focus of his interest is in the qualities of the translations (Helft & Pauls 108-109 *et passim*),⁵ he also makes some comments on their faithfulness to the agreed source language.

¹ On this point see also Elisséeff. Elisséeff comments "il y a dans les lettres une crise grave: nous sommes alors entre les deux phases de la Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes, ... le public est las d'entendre raisonner des Latins et des Grecs".

² These are some of the questions raised in a series of workshops on "Genre Ideologies and Narrative Transformations" held at SOAS, University of London, 2000-2003. The present article is a revised version of a paper given at the third workshop, November 2002.

³ For a study of Borges and the Orient see Kushigian, particularly 19-42.

⁴ See Caracciolo (Introduction and Chapter 6), Irwin, Kristal 25-30, Louis 318-364.

⁵ Alain Pauls is right in his comment that Borges focuses on the context of the translations rather than the original yet Borges discusses the *Nights* origins and early editions and comments on "the faded flavour of the original."

But his knowledge of the source was not first hand: he took his first lessons in Arabic shortly before his death in Geneva (see Tornelli). This anecdotal piece of information allows us to read the attempt to cross cultural boundaries with the limited tools of one's own culture so subtly ironised in "Averroës" Search" in a new light. "Averroës" start as a fictional elaboration of the Islamic scholar's vain efforts to comprehend a culture other than his own (aristotelian aesthetics), but turns out to have been a self-reflecting image of the narrator's own attempt to portray Islamic culture on the basis of a handful of Western readings. The link between this story and Borges's writings on the *Nights* is perhaps inescapable, yet the point to be made is not a questioning of his undoubted erudition or his insight of the translations he discusses, but to show his acute awareness of the complexity of the (postmodern) problem of how to embrace the "Other" while still respecting its difference, that kernel of otherness which defies appropriation and translation.

The *Nights* are mentioned explicitly in several Borges stories: in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "The Garden of Forking Paths", "The Zahir", "The Man on the Threshold", "Brodie's Report" and "The Book of Sand" while particular tales from the *Nights* are alluded to in others. Critics have rightly pointed out that they appear at key moments in the fiction to open it up to an alternative fantastic interpretation⁶. Yet the diversity in the role allusion to the *Nights* plays in Borges affects all overarching statements. For example, in "The South", the presence of the *Nights* is most insistent as it is mentioned at four different moments, and although every one is associated with the relationship between fiction and reality this happens in complex and contradictory ways. The first explains that it is his impatience to peruse a copy of Weil's version of the *Nights* which is the direct cause of the accident suffered by the main character, Johannes Dahlman; the second, links his feverish nightmares to the awesome illustrations of Weil's *Nights*; the third refers to Dahlmann's train journey, when he decides to start reading the first volume of the *Nights* to prove that he has overcome the trauma of his illness. On this occasion he finds he has no need of fantasy because he feels

⁶ Regarding "The South", see Irwin 285; for a more general statement, Piglia 51.

happy travelling through the Buenos Aires outskirts, yet later on in the story, the situation is exactly the opposite: in a country store, mocked by some aggressive drinkers, Dahlmann does need the escape fantasy offers and turns, once more, to the *Nights*. This story is unusual in that Borges himself has offered three possible explanations of its highly improbable plot line: one, that it happened as narrated, which would make the allusion to the *Nights* a realistic detail concerning a bookish protagonist; two, that the ending was a nightmare, which would make the story back to realism from Todorov's uncanny moment of hesitation; three, that it expressed the innermost wishes of the Borges-like protagonist: to die in a knife-fight (See Bernès 1596-8). The allusions to the *Nights* inflect this last interpretation differently, with a suggestion of *dédoublement* (a recurrent feature of the *Nights*).

It is interesting to note that there are changes in the autobiographical beginning of the story. In real life, one Christmas Eve Borges suffered a similar accident to Dahlmann's when he rushed up the stairs to meet "une jeune fille chilienne tres belle" (in Bernès' version of Borges's account of the incident).⁷ He hurt himself, septicaemia set in, and he suffered prolonged feverish nightmares. Why change the beautiful Chilean to a copy of the *Nights*, and why particularly to Weil's version? The second question is easy to answer: because of Borges's meticulous attention to detail, for Weil's version has, indeed, some truly gruesome illustrations. Within the fantasy, this is a realistic detail. Critics are too ready to assume that Borges is "making up" his allusions; usually, it is precisely the opposite the case, in that the allusion is invoked with great precision and imagination, as in this case. But what of the other references?

I shall leave to psychoanalysts to elaborate on the change from the beautiful Chilean to a volume of the *Nights*; for literary purposes it introduces with the marvels of the *Nights* the topic of the relationship of life and fiction. The last two references to the *Nights* are more precise on this: measured against the joy of life, Scheherazade's miracles have become "superfluous": "Happiness distracted him

⁷ For an account of this accident as a spur to his fiction writing, see Borges's "Autobiographical Essay".

from Scheherazade and her *superfluous* miracles" (F 149, my emphasis), but when life becomes threatening, "he opened the volume of *The Arabian Nights* as though to block out reality" (F 152, my emphasis), and the magic of fiction becomes an alternative to reality, a means of escape from its horror and a strategy for survival. Through these references to the *Nights* Borges is weaving several of his ideas about fiction into his own fiction such as its dangers, its dreamlike qualities, its redundancy and its consolation but most particularly his belief that literature is not a mirror that reflects reality but is something added to the world: "una cosa más agregada al mundo" (OC 1: 795).

If we think of the key concepts associated with Borges's fiction we will surely come up with the following: infinity, the labyrinth, entertainment (diversion), mirrors, duplication, embedding, and centrality. It is interesting to look at these well-worn borgesian themes from the perspective of the *Nights*.

INFINITY

There is no canonical text of the *Nights*: the movement from orality to writing, the uncertain but widespread origins of this cluster of tales, and their open ended and many layered composition, receiving accretions, interpolations and imitations, makes this an infinite text.⁸ Such a literary *œuvre* in permanent transformation underlies Borges's story "The Immortal" which oddly, does not seem to mention the *Nights* as one of the many transmutations of the eternal, total book. And yet, it does, in an almost cryptic reference, namely, to the 1835 Bulaq edition: "in the seventh century of the Hegira, on the outskirts of Bulaq, I transcribed with deliberate calligraphy, in a language I have forgotten, in an alphabet I know not, the seven voyages of Sinbad and the story of the City of Brass"⁹ (192).

⁸ In *Seven Nights*, Borges declared the notion of infinity to be inherent in the *Nights*.

⁹ References to Borges's fiction will be to A. Hurley's translation, *Collected Fictions*, and will appear parenthetically after each quotation. When not otherwise stated, reference to Borges's non-fiction will be to *The total library*. According to Robert Irwin, the Bulaq text became the source of most subsequent printed versions of the *Nights* (44).

The reference to Sinbad is particularly opportune in the context of inter and transtextuality in "The Immortal": first, because the Sinbad cycle is one of the many accretions to the *Nights*, a proof of its loose structure and secondly, because of its association with the *Odyssey* (Sinbad encounters and blinds a giant in his third voyage, an incident which echoes Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus, as noted by Borges in *Seven Nights*).

Borges not only commented on the open-endedness of the title "The Thousand and One Nights", that is, a thousand, standing for infinity, having still one Night added to it, but also played with this openness. He re-wrote some of the *Nights*, namely, "The Chamber of Statues" and "The Story of the Two Dreamers", removing the religious admonishing of Galland's version and introducing a more metaphysical flavour.¹⁰ With the proverbial tongue-in-cheek, Borges attributed the latter tale to Gustav Weil, its translator.¹¹ Even more controversially, he repeatedly attributed his own invented story, "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths" to Burton, and to the *Nights*.¹²

Borges added to the *Nights* in other ways too. For instance, the manuscript of "Brodie's Report" in the eponymous story was found hidden inside a copy of the first volume of Lane's translation, with a suggestion that in time this story will become integrated into the Lane text. Borges is here continuing in the tradition of the medieval copyists, who often intercalated their favourite stories (See Irwin 42-62, particularly 58-9). *The Book of Sand*, so called because "neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end" (...) "No page is the first page; no page is the last" (91)¹³ most epitomises the idea of the total and endless book. Its association with the *Nights* is suggested

¹⁰ For a discussion of the changes made by Borges, see Kristal 71-74.

¹⁴ In *Antología de la literatura fantástica* 404-5, but not in *Collected Fictions* (cf. fn on 531).

¹² Bernès (1640-1) gives detailed information on the checkered history of this invented tale. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths" and "Ibn Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth" see Pablo Brescia (particularly 159 fn 22) and Boldy.

¹³ A book of an infinite number of self-proliferating pages was anticipated as a *single volume* in the "The Library of Babel".

when the narrator chooses to hide it “behind some imperfect volumes of the *Thousand and One Nights*”. I read the word “imperfect” as a reference, precisely, to the open-endedness of the *Nights*, which *The Book of Sand* reflects.

THE LABYRINTH AND ITS DIVERSIONS IN THE *NIGHTS* AND IN BORGES

The opening image of all the volumes of Richard Burton’s 1885 translation of the *Nights* has a figure strongly suggestive of a labyrinth construction (it is not, strictly speaking, a labyrinth, but very evocative of one).¹⁴ This figure is obviously related to the intricate pattern of self-proliferating stories within stories that are endlessly told by Scheherazade. As we all know, Scheherazade constructs her labyrinth of stories to prolong her life but when she reaches the symbolic centre she is saved. This a happy ending, however, does not endure the passing of time or changes of culture: in Borges’s fiction, there is often a moment of illumination, or its delusion on reaching the symbolic centre of the labyrinth, but either madness, or death, inevitably awaits.

In a traditional labyrinth you have to turn, and turn, and turn again until you find the centre (or the way out). These turns are *diversions* (Latin *divertere*) which mean both to amuse and to turn aside. The “*Nights*” mission was to draw attention away from a serious concern (diversion) through entertainment (diversion). The title, *The Arabian Nights “Entertainments”* makes this clear. Borges repeats the claim for himself: “My stories, like those of the *Thousand and One Nights* (...) try to be entertaining or moving, (...) not persuasive” (*Brodie’s Report* Foreword 345). Yet what form does this entertainment take? For Scheherazade, as mentioned, it is a life-saving operation; her tales are what delays the moment of her execution. She weaves her labyrinthine web of tales to enthrall and entrap the King, enlighten him and reach, eventually the traditional fairy tale ending. Interesting parallels can be found in Borges’s “The Secret Miracle” where Hadlik, the main character, has also been condemned to

¹⁴ For a full discussion of this point see Caracciolo xiii–xvii.

death, by a dictator more vicious and implacable than Shahyiar, namely Hitler, and he too thinks of resorting to fiction to delay the moment of his death.¹⁵ But unlike Scheherazade, Hladik has no captive interlocutor; as Foucault points out, he tells stories that are not to be heard, or even read, by anyone.¹⁶ His is a purely private means of survival. From the moment he is sentenced to death he escapes into various fantasies, among them endless atrocious death scenes. Yet "Sometimes, impatiently, he yearned (...) for the blast that would redeem him (...) from his vain imaginings" (158). Hladik's occasional wish for death simply not to have to go on imagining life-saving plots is a despondency we do not hear from Scheherazade. When Hladik realises that these fantasies are clearly not working, he switches tack in desperation, and asks God to grant him a year to perfect his circular drama *The Enemies*, a play he had written earlier and left unfinished. "Painstakingly, motionless, secretly, he forged in time his grand invisible labyrinth" (160) repeating endlessly the framestory with death-delaying variations. He believes that through his fiction he will be able to give sense not only to his life but also justify God's existence.

One of the questions we are asked to consider in connection with narrative transformations is "why do tellers tell tales and what do tales tell about the tellers and their world". There is, very obviously, a dark shift in the "entertainment" motif from the *Nights* to "The Secret Miracle", responding to their different cultural contexts but there is also an important element of continuity uniting the texts in their shared belief in the enduring power of narrative. Of course this belief is triumphant in the *Nights*, and cruelly and self-mockingly ridiculed in Borges's twentieth century fiction for Hladik dies a bare two minutes after the appointed time.

¹⁵ Reality has provided us with a more nightmarish example of a death delaying tactic than fiction could ever dream up. I am thinking of the musicians in Auschwitz who played every night to save their lives.

¹⁶ See Foucault 47, also 45, 48. Strategies for postponing fictional death in modern literature are discussed by W. B. Farris. I am indebted to Lois Zamora Parkinson for alerting me to this article.

But “The Secret Miracle” can also be read differently, as a gloss on the Koranic verse which serves as its epigraph:

And God caused him to die for an hundred years, and then raised him to life. And God said, “How long hast thou waited?” He said, “I have waited a day or part of a day” (Qu’ran, 2: 261)

If we take an epigraph to be the gateway to the main text, we will find in this one an ironic inversion of the secret miracle of the story where the two minutes’ delay in Hadlik’s execution seemed to him as a year, allowing the fulfilment of his wish. I am proposing here that we read in this epigraph an invitation to consider the magic of the story, as opposed to the horror of its reality, as its central element. By directing us to the Islamic traces of the story a possible trajectory is established through the Koran to the *Nights* through the link made by Borges mentioned earlier, when he declared Sheherazade’s tales to be “less inventive than Allah’s”.¹⁷

This reading is obviously not unequivocal, but seen and understood from the vantage point of “that vast dream of Islam”, so rich in miracles, it becomes a convincing layer of interpretation, and, I suggest, a not undeserving continuation of the *Nights*.

EMBEDDING AND CENTRALITY ¹⁸

Most of the main collections of Borges’s fictional work, “The Garden of Forking Paths”, “The Aleph”, “Dr. Brodie’s Report” and “The Book of Sand”, have a story of the same name embedded in it, which in turn embeds a story of that same name. It is noteworthy that they all make some allusion to the *Nights*. If I had to choose the one feature of the *Nights* most closely linked to Borges and most fre-

¹⁷ Needless to say, the *Koran’s* influence permeates the *Nights*, well beyond the borge-sian connection argued here.

¹⁸ On embedding, see Todorov 67-69. It is noteworthy that most of the main collections of Borges’s fictional work have a story of the same name embedded in it, which in turn embeds a story of that same name and they all make some allusion to the *Nights*. They are “The Garden of Forking Paths”, “The Aleph”, “Dr. Brodie’s Report” and “The Book of Sand”. This observation adds a structural significance to the link between regressus in Borges and the *Nights*.

quently mentioned by him it would be the night that is embedded at the centre of the work, “magic among nights” in which the King allegedly hears his own story related in one of Scheherazade’s tales. This assertion by Borges is quoted in every study of the *Nights* that I have come across (even a travel book on Sicily);¹⁹ however, Borges’s specular interpretation of this Night, which arguably has influenced many subsequent readings of the *Nights*, has been the object of much dispute and merits separate discussion.²⁰ For my purposes here, the accuracy of the details is not of uppermost importance; what is significant is the reading of this Night that Borges constructs and which focuses, in “The Garden of Forking Paths” on centrality as the privileged site of revelation: “I also recalled that night at the centre of the 1001 *Nights*, when the queen Scheherazade (through some magical distractedness on the part of the copyist) begins to retell, verbatim, the story of the 1001 *Nights*, with the risk of returning once again to the night on which she is telling it - and so on, *ad infinitum*” (125). This Night, with all its attributes, is referred to repeatedly as Night 602, which is clearly not at the centre of 1001 and yet Borges artfully glides over this anomaly, “reading creatively”, as always.²¹ The idea of a sovereign mid-point, whether in theology, cosmology, architecture or literature, once carried a generally recognised iconological significance (Fowler 23) and is still, today, an important element in structural criticism. The weight that Borges attaches to this “central night” coincides, strikingly, with that ascribed to the centre in “ring composition” where it is considered “so important, [that] it can carry the meaning of the whole”. In some

¹⁹ See Robb. Robb adds: “Something odd was going on here. The oddness was that all this literary filtering and indirection from Arabic to English to Spanish to Italian came back to the old Arabic starting point”. The Borges quotation regarding the magical night appears in the context of his having been Sciascia “great enabling influence” 275-6.

²⁰ I expand on this issue in “Readings and Re-readings of Night 602”, forthcoming in *Variaciones Borges* 18 (2004).

²¹ Night 602 is mentioned in “The Translators of the 1001 *Nights*”; in “When Fiction Lives in Fiction” and in “Partial Magic of the Quixote”. It is also alluded to indirectly in the poem “The Metaphors of the 1001 *Nights*”.

ring composition ... "The meaning does not accumulate with the progress of the piece, it fans out from the middle".²²

It is from this perspective of central accent that I should like to consider the *Nights*, -let me insist on this: the *Nights* as filtered through Borges's reading- and suggest, somewhat playfully, a possible reading of "Emma Zunz" as a transmuted manifestation of this structure across cultures and genres.

My argument will be that both the *Nights* and "Emma Zunz" are constructed around a pivotal mid-point in which a groundbreaking revelation takes place, though with different outcomes.

The idea of a magic night of revelation occurs twice in Borges's fiction, at strategically important moments. In "Tlön" there is a famous allusion to the "Night of Nights", described as the night when "the secret portals of the heavens open wide and the water in the water jars is sweeter than on other nights" (71).²³ The vertiginous emotion engendered by this magic night is relived by the narrator as he leafs through a book of precisely 1001 pages, the 11th volume of an Encyclopaedia. It is the ordered classification of the total history of an unknown planet. In "The Garden of Forking Paths", the memory of this central Night has a revelatory effect, allowing the sinologist Albert to decipher Ts'ui Pen's perplexing novel, and see it as a metaphor for our labyrinthine universe.

²² Mary Douglas, unpublished lecture on "Ring Composition, Ancient and Modern". In "ring composition" there are matching parallels on each side of a middle chiasmus, the point of return to things previously mentioned, or things resembling them, in reverse order. I am not here making a case for either the *Nights* or "Emma Zunz" as examples of ring composition, but am borrowing from it the concept of a weight-carrying central point for my discussion of Borges's insistence on "the magic night at the centre of the collection". I am extremely grateful to Prof. Douglas for kindly making available to me her unpublished FD Maurice Lectures, 2002, and for discussing ring composition with me, particularly for clarifying that there is more to ring composition than a load-bearing centre.

²³ The Night of Nights, or The Night of Power is a Koranic concept (see chapter xcvi.3) and is mentioned in Night 596, "The Tale of The Three Wishes or the Man who longed to see the Night of Power". This tale introduces the cluster of stories on the Malice of Women, featuring Night 602. Of interest to the Conference topic of narrative transmutations is the note in Lane which points out that this same belief in a Night of revelation existed in medieval Europe regarding Christmas Eve (Lane III 180).

A central night of vertiginous revelation also occurs in "Emma Zunz", but here it is of a more intimate order.

Revenge, forced intercourse and false accusations of seduction are shared topics in both narratives. In the *Nights* the initial revenge is public, large-scale and passes uncommented. When the King witnesses the amorous antics of his harem he has the faithless Queen killed, and participates personally in the killing of all his concubines and their Mameluke lovers. He exacts his revenge even further, each night taking a virgin as a wife, only to have her executed the following morning. In "Emma Zunz" the idea of revenge is also immediate, as in the *Nights*, but its execution is premeditated, carefully planned, and highly complex. Emma, the heroine, devises a plan to avenge her wrongly accused father, news of whose death (suicide is suggested) has just reached her, by killing the man who had framed him and who is now her employer, Loewenthal. Emma artfully hides her plan under another plan in which she will kill her employer pleading the excuse that he has raped her.

The layout of the two narratives differs quite substantially. In the expansive *Nights*, we have an initial story, generating the next story, generating the next. Borges wrote of these ramifications, "the effect is superficial, like a Persian carpet".²⁴ In his own story, the same proliferation of tales of revenge occurs, though more economically: here the different versions do not unfold horizontally or consecutively but vertically, embedded in the same surface tale. Let me explain: Emma's revenge for her father is nested beneath the outward and publicly believed story of her self-defence; moreover it is inferred rather than spelt out; that is to say, not so much stated in the narrative as suggested.

However, near the heart of the story (I refused to count the lines, but they may well correspond to the ratio 602:1001), while the virginal Emma is having intercourse with a sailor to provide herself with the necessary evidence for her defence, in "a time outside time" there is pivotal episode, when the story turns on its axis. In a (near) palindromic sentence, "*pensó, (no pudo no pensar)*" -"she

²⁴ Quoted both in "When Fiction Lives in Fiction" and in "Partial Magic of the Quixote".

thought, (she could not help thinking)"- Emma experiences the shocking insight that her father must have done to her mother "the horrible thing being done to her now" (217). At this crucial moment yet another layer is added: this is the contradictory motivation to avenge her mother for the abuse she has suffered from her father, and by extension, to avenge herself. Her false plan has become true: she has become conscious of suffering sexual abuse and Lowenthal, her employer and her father's betrayer, is the indirect cause of it. In the *Nights* these would have been separate proliferating stories but here they are here subsumed into one multilayered core story.

But while the tales of revenge unfold differently there is an element of continuity, which evolves around a central moment of insight in both narratives. The story that the King hears on Night 602 (in the versions by Burton, Payne, Littman, and Lane, [where it is summarised in a note], to name just those I was able to trace) concerns a Prince who is blackmailed by an imprisoned Damsel to make love to her while her Afrit is sleeping, else she will accuse him of seduction; he complies and is then made to leave his seal ring as a memento to add to her collection of illicit lovers. The Damsel is seeking revenge for the Afrit's abuse from all the men she encounters (a point which may be seen as a significant trace in my reading of Emma Zunz). The story replicates almost exactly the King's own experience in the frame story, in which the King and his brother were also both forcibly seduced and made to leave their seal rings by a Damsel seeking revenge on the Demon who had imprisoned her. This repetition gives rise, in Borges's reading, to the fear that it may recur endlessly.

A similar *regressus* occurs in Emma Zunz, where one plot reflects another, and another and another. Both experiences, the King's and Emma's, are examples of the devise known as *mise en abyme*, which occurs "when the work turns back on itself, and appears to be a kind of *reflexion*" (Dallenbach 172).²⁵ Semantically the word "abyme" evokes ideas of depth, of infinity, of vertigo. First used in connection with literature by Gide, the phrase stems from heraldry where a

²⁵ Dallenbach discusses the various examples of *mise en abyme* which Borges lists in "Partial Magic of the Quixote".

shield containing in its centre a miniature replica of itself is said to be *en abyme*. In the heraldic example, the figure at the heart of the shield may be combined with other figures, but does not touch any of these figures (Dallenbach 8 and 189 fn 7). The tale in Night 602 reflects but does not touch the frame story. This is not so in Emma Zunz where the “figures” made up of each plan of revenge are compressed and expressed by the same overall figure, the false outward plot which eventually becomes true.²⁶

Not only the disposition but also the effect of self-embedding in the two narratives may be seen as different. Night 602 offers the possibility of an illuminating insight which foresees the happy ending of the *Nights*. The King in this tale condemns his son to death for having lost his seal ring, in the same circumstances as Shahryar, the King in the frame story, but his Wizir delays the execution in case he comes to regret his decision, which the King does when the Prince’s innocence is revealed. The frame story’s King Shahryar, therefore, may see himself not only reflected in the Prince’s adventure with the Afrit’s Mistress but also in the cruelty of the Prince’s father, the other King, with Scheherazade and her tales performing the same task as the Wazir, namely, saving him from killing an innocent victim, herself.²⁷

In the Borges story, Emma’s insight during the intercourse at the centre of the story is also magically revelatory in that it enhances her awareness of what is happening to her, but her illuminating moment, unlike Shahryar’s, has no positive effect upon the initial plot, in fact, no effect at all: she carries out the killing of Loewenthal exactly as originally planned. The self-embedded layers in Emma Zunz are identical in their manifestation in that the initial plan has not changed by one iota.

Foucault, quoting Borges, notes of *The Arabian Nights* that “the mirror structure is explicitly presented here: at its centre, the work

²⁶ Borges offers another extreme case of self-embedding in “On Exactitude in Science”. Baudrillard uses this short fiction to illustrate his own discussion of the *simulacrum* in modern culture.

²⁷ This interpretation is based on the (near) centrality of the Night: I discuss alternatives in “Reading and Re-reading”.

holds up a mirror (...) in which it appears as if in miniature (...)” (Dallenbach 169). This borgesian image of self-embedding has been transmuted in Borges’s own fiction into a centre which also holds up a mirror, but refracted on it are different images of the same story of revenge.

What does all this say about the *Nights* and “Emma Zunz”? The differences separating these two narratives offer an illustration of how stories transform and are transformed in time and across cultures. But what I have found of particular interest is how despite all obvious transformations a shared structural element remained, highlighted by Borges in his reading of the *Nights* and writing of his fiction: I refer to the *mise en abyme* at the centre of both narratives as a moment of illumination and self-knowledge.

Regarding the specific topic of this discussion of the interface between the *Nights* and Borges, I hope you will agree that readings of Borges’s fiction from the *Nights* offer a fruitful source of new interpretations, or, perhaps less ambitiously but more fun and more borgesian, new shades of meaning in the same interpretation.

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