

“Hitler Wants to be Defeated”: On Borges, Freud, and the Death Drive

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Yes, but there is a hidden psychology behind the story
because, if not, the characters would be mere puppets.

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Paris Review*, 1967

Jorge Luis Borges never had much to say about Sigmund Freud.¹ In his now famous exchange with then Brandeis undergraduate Richard Burgin in the winter of 1967, published a year later as *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*, the Argentine issued some of his most frank remarks about the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis in a stretch of the conversation prefaced by swift encounters with Darwin, Nietzsche, Communism, Nazism, Heidegger, and existentialism.

Burgin: I take it you don't think much of Freud, either.

Borges: No, I always disliked him. But I've always been a great reader of [Carl Gustav] Jung. I read Jung in the same way as, let's say, I might read

1 Borges scholars have had as little to say about this relationship as Borges ever had to say about Freud. The vast majority of scholarship on this subject has consisted of psychoanalytic readings of Borges's short stories. See, for example, Woscoboinik, *El secreto de Borges* and *El alma de "El Aleph"*; Carvalho; Priel; Portugal M. Saliba; and Yankelevich.

Pliny or Frazer's *Golden Bough*, I read it as a kind of mythology, or as a kind of museum or encyclopedia of curious lores.

Burgin: When you say that you dislike Freud, what do you mean?

Borges: I think of him as a kind of madman, no? A man laboring over a sexual obsession. Well, perhaps he didn't take it to heart. Perhaps he was just doing it as a kind of game. I tried to read him, and I thought of him either as a charlatan or as a madman, in a sense. After all, the world is far too complex to be boiled down to that all-to-simple scheme. But in Jung, well, of course, Jung I have read far more widely than Freud, but in Jung you feel a wide and hospitable mind. In the case of Freud, it all boils down to a few rather unpleasant facts. But, of course, that's merely my ignorance or my bias. (109)²

Some might be taken aback by this cryptic passage. Why would Borges, whose father was a professor of psychology at the time of Freud's ascent,³ claim not to have understood one of the key thinkers in recent European history? Borges rarely, if ever, so adamantly pleaded ignorance or misunderstanding about anyone, making the particular case of Freud all the more suspicious. By 1967 Freudian psychoanalysis had again reached a fever pitch in European intellectual life owing to the seminars of Jacques Lacan, which began in 1953 and claimed a 'return to Freud.'⁴ Yet Borges insisted he was "unworthy" ["indigno"] (*Escuela Freudiana* 52) of Freud. Another curiosity is the black-and-white distinction he makes between Freud's and Jung's thought, claiming to have understood the latter, but that the former was beyond him. Borges's antagonism remains enigmatic at best. If Jung's mind was hospitable, presumably Freud's was not. But what was the nature of its inhospitality?

2 At a conference given at the Escuela Freudiana de Buenos Aires (Freudian School of Buenos Aires) under the title "Los sueños y la poesía" ("Dreams and poetry") on September 19, 1980, Borges almost repeats verbatim his earlier answer to Burgin. See *Escuela Freudiana*, 52-53.

3 On the influence of Borges's father's profession on his work, see Guardia Lezcano.

4 By 1967, in fact, Lacan was no longer teaching his seminar in private at Sainte-Anne Hospital, but at the salle Dussane in the École Normale Supérieure, putting him squarely at the center of the Parisian intellectual scene. Coincidentally, according to Sergio Waisman, this was around the same time that Borges was "discovered" by the French literary scene thanks to the patronage—by way of translations, prizes, and publicity—of Roger Caillois (35-37).

The questions continue. What do we make of Borges's suggestion that Freud boils everything "down to that all-too-simple scheme" (i.e. psychoanalysis)? Presumably he thinks psychoanalysis affords sexuality too much importance in the realm of everyday life, but he may have other reasons for rejecting it too. Moments later in the conversation with Burgin, Borges affirms symmetry as the guiding principle to life (*Conversations* 109-111). Is not symmetry an equally simple scheme as sexuality? Finally, what do we make of Borges's literary references to Sir James George Frazer's study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890), as well as Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* (77-79 CE)? If other obscure citations in Borges's referential universe are any indication, readers cannot simply understand these as random strokes of the pen.

Borges fails to provide any direct answers to questions concerning his relationship with psychoanalysis. Many of Borges's critics have followed suit, leaving psychoanalysis almost completely off the table as one of his intellectual sources or personal interests. To take but one of many examples, Efraín Kristal, a scholar not known for his hostility to psychoanalysis, accepts what Borges says about his disregard for Freud. In the closing lines of *Invisible Work*, his book on Borges and translation, Kristal writes, "Given his skepticism about Freud, and his sometimes disparaging remarks about psychoanalysis ('psychoanalysis involves gossip and indiscretions about sexual life,') his identification with Spinoza as a pathetic figure takes on an ironic twist" (144-45). Borges's disparaging remarks about Freud are not the only features of his work that give certain credence to this interpretation. Indeed, according to Daniel Balderston's monumental index, *The Literary Universe of Jorge Luis Borges*, the Argentine writer cites Freud a mere eight times in his entire published oeuvre (57).⁵ Several of these citations indirectly refer to Freudian ideas about the "subconscious"

5 We should note here that Balderston elsewhere establishes a curious connection between Borges and Freud via the short story, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" ("Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"). He finds that a French doctor named Pierre Menard published a book in 1931 under the title *L'écriture et le subconscient: Psychanalyse et graphologie* (*Writing and the Subconscious: Psychoanalysis and Graphology*) in which "Menard saw himself as a lesser disciple of the Viennese master" and reproduced in his monograph his letter exchanges with the father of psychoanalysis. See Balderston, *Out of Context*, 35-36, and Menard.

(“subconsciente”) or “psychoanalysis” (“psicoanálisis”).⁶ Though these terms may be stand-ins for Freud, they could just as easily refer to a number of other early twentieth-century psychologists, psychoanalysts, and even philosophers such as William James.⁷ Borges’s adulation for Jung would lead one to believe his Jungian index to be more numerous than his Freudian one. But the fact that he never dedicated a single text to Jung and cites him only four more times than Freud in his published works, according to Balderston’s index, calls into question this supposed affinity. Moreover, in one of the Freud references, Borges appears to excoriate both Freud and Jung at the same time. “Now [in 1973], we have less beautiful mythology,” Borges writes, “we do not speak of ‘rua’ (the spirit), we do not speak of the muse, but instead we speak of something less incomprehensible and less beautiful, we speak of the subconscious or of the collective subconscious” [“Ahora tenemos una mitología menos hermosa, no hablamos del ‘rua’ (el espíritu), no hablamos de la musa, pero hablamos de algo no menos incomprendible y menos bello, hablamos de la subconsciencia o del subconsciente colectivo”] (*Páginas* 236).⁸ Psychoanalysis’s pretensions toward analytical precision, for Borges, nevertheless entails metaphysical ambiguity. At important moments in his oeuvre, Borges expresses little sympathy for psychoanalytical thinking, regardless of whether it is Freud’s individual or Jung’s collective subconscious.

Attempts to link Freud and Borges have so far come almost exclusively in the form of psychoanalytic readings. Julio Woscoboinik, a psychoanalyst and literary critic who has written two books on the matter, terms his mode of reading “una indagación psicoanalítica” (“a psychoanalytic inquiry”). His is an emphasis that focuses on Borges’s sexual biography

6 Balderston’s index, for example, cites a talk Borges gave in the Centro de Estudios Brasileños (Center for Brazilian Studies) in Buenos Aires on June 29, 1972 under the title “Destino y obra de Camoens” (“Fate and Work of Camoens”) as one of the eight citations of Freud. Borges refers in the essay to the “subconscious” (“subconsciencia”) and the “collective subconscious” (“subconsciente colectivo”). Though these clearly refer to some aspect of Freudian psychoanalysis, they may also—and perhaps more explicitly—refer to Jung’s collective unconscious. Regardless, in the essay Borges treats both terms dismissively.

7 William James and other pragmatists enjoyed an important place in Borges work. See Bosteels.

8 Borges here refers to the Hebrew word for spirit, רוּחַ, Romanized as *ruach* or, sometimes, *ruah*.

and its expression in his literary work. Psychoanalyzing symbols, metaphors, and other kinds of description leads Woscoboinik to conclude that "mystery-silence-reservation-numbers-keys-arcane" are what "mark the phobias and terrors of nearly his entire literary works" ["Misterio-sigilo-reserva-secreto-cifra-clave-arcano marcan las fobias y terrores de casi toda su creación literaria"] (*El secreto* 167). Among psychoanalytic readings of literature, Woscoboinik's biographical approach contrasts with others that might focus instead on narrative structure. Ana María Portugal M. Saliba, another practicing psychoanalyst who has intervened in the literary debate over Borges's relation to Freud, for example, falls into this second camp. Her approach concerns the elements of fantasy in Borges's work, psychoanalyzing his "type of fantasy, which eludes critics in terms of its classification and the process by which it is constructed" ["tipo de fantástico que desafía a los críticos en lo que se refiere a su clasificación y a sus procesos de construcción"] (181). As opposed to Woscoboinik, who looks for answers in the author's biography, Saliba opts for elucidating causal psychoanalytic mechanisms within the world of the literature itself. "His texts deceive us for their brevity, the simple way in which they are constructed, and their use of colloquial language," Saliba writes. But, in reality, they "launch us into a causal nightmare, because they compel us [...] to find the logic in their plot structure, which, at any moment, usually escape our grasp" ["sus textos nos engañan por su brevedad, sencillez de construcción y uso del lenguaje coloquial... nos lanzan en la pesadilla causal, porque nos llevan... a buscar la lógica de sus tramas que en todo momento suelen escapar de nuestras manos"] (187). While Woscoboinik remains at the level of sexual frustration, Saliba's linguistic register focuses instead on processes and their causes.⁹ Besides these two camps, which read his work with the tools of psychoanalysis, other scholars too have studied the seeming missed encounter between Borges and Freud. Sylvia Molloy, for example, does not engage in psychoanalytic reading, but instead connects Borges and Freud through Franz Kafka and *Unheimlichkeit* (most often translated as "uncanny"). In her foundational book, *Signs of Borges*, Molloy suggests, albeit circuitously, that, "even though Borges and

9 Beatriz Priel also focuses on structural aspects in her essay on Borges and Freud. Instead of reaffirming causality, like Saliba, however, Priel notes how Borges and Freud similarly "deconstructed concepts of causality and repetition" (13).

Freud consider the consequences of ‘distortion’ in radically different ways, bringing the two together is not entirely impertinent since there are odd similarities in their shared interest in (or rather their passionate curiosity for) the uncanny as an organizing principle” (77-78). Critics since then have followed Molloy’s tripartite linking of Borges and Freud through Kafka (see Tcherepashenets and Saliba).

Although Borges often issued frank dismissals, as evidenced by the conversation with Burgin, his perspective on psychoanalysis is more textured than what is often assumed. María Esther Vázquez, the co-author with Borges of *Introducción a la literatura inglesa* (1965; *Introduction to English Literature*) and *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (1966; *Germanic Medieval Literatures*), raises the question of psychoanalysis explicitly during a conversation they shared in 1964. “What do you think of psychoanalysis?” she asked. “I could dare to say that it perhaps lacks any curing virtue, that psychoanalysis could have invented imaginary facts but, applied to literary criticism, it’s absurd,” Borges said. “It’s absurd to psychoanalyze Macbeth or Hamlet. On the other hand, psychoanalysis is very important as a stimulus for the literary imagination and—as we’ve seen in the case of *Psycho*—for the creation of fantasy films” [“—¿Qué piensa del psicoanálisis? —Podría atreverme a decir que carece quizá de toda virtud curativa, que el psicoanálisis puede haber inventado hechos imaginarios pero, aplicado a la crítica literaria, es absurdo. Es absurdo psicoanalizar a *Macbeth* o a *Hamlet*. En cambio, el psicoanálisis es muy importante como estímulo para la imaginación literaria y ya lo hemos visto en el caso de “Psicosis” para la invención de películas fantásticas.”] (157). A swift inversion halfway through the answer allows Borges to claim a complete rejection of psychoanalysis as a form of literary criticism and, at the same time, assert it as a meaningful source for literature and the arts. Scholars have read these and other remarks on psychoanalysis as an impulsive repudiation of anything that sniffs of biographical probing (see Menton).

I read Borges’s comments less personally and more structurally, however. They aim to reject what one might call the “application thesis”: that particular theoretical apparatuses can simply be applied to the reading of literary texts, which would include everything from psychoanalysis to Marxism, from Russian formalism to New Criticism, and beyond. His writings and statements point to his belief that theories were only valid in the

case that they developed something internal to literature itself. In another quote, he criticized “the pathological mythology of today’s Procrustes, Sigmund Freud” [“la mitología patológica del reciente Procasto, Sigmund Freud”] (“Cazotte” 24). The problem with psychoanalysis, Borges seemed to suggest, might be less its principle than its indiscriminate application. As with the Greek myth of Procrustes, literary criticism, for Borges, should not quarter its writers of different shapes to fit the arbitrary size of the psychoanalytic iron bed. Psychoanalysis and other theoretical tools must not be applied per se but be found intrinsic to a text. That is, the text itself, for Borges, must be psychoanalytic. Such a view might—conveniently, for an author—reduce literary criticism to debates over authorial intention, narrowly defined. Borges’s commentary on psychoanalysis had little to say about the psychoanalytical method itself. But if his was an undoubtedly conservative definition of literary criticism, it nevertheless retained at least one important virtue: it shows us what Borges himself understood psychoanalysis to mean.

Borges steadfastly maintained throughout his writing career a diametrical opposition to Freud, going even so far as to suggest, “I have failed in my reading of him” [“He fracasado en su lectura”] (Abraham, Rússovich, and Marí).¹⁰ Borges never laid claim to psychoanalytic inspiration publically. And his silence on Freud is by all accounts a missed encounter in the history of ideas. This essay, however, will attempt to help dispel the notion that Borges did not use psychoanalysis to inform his own work and instead begin to inch the two thinkers closer together. Borges, I will argue, benefitted from at least one major psychoanalytic concept: *Todestrieb* or the death drive. And it is a concept that Freud, not Jung, introduced, hesitantly, into psychoanalysis. Freud began writing about the death drive during the interwar period and some have argued that his turn to the death drive summarizes his greatest revision of psychoanalysis following World War I. The death drive primarily revised the idea that “life drives”—

10 This interview, which apparently was not printed in Spanish, was carried out on 12 September 1984 at the Department of Psychology of the University of Buenos Aires. An excerpt from this interview, which does not include the discussion about Freud and psychoanalysis, was translated into English. See Abraham, Rússovich, and Marí, “The Destiny of Borges.”

the preservation of oneself—accounted for the motivation behind human desire.

What follows largely focuses on a minor essay in Borges's corpus, "Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944" ("A Comment on August 23, 1944"). Such a narrow focus necessarily confines the argument's scope and ambition. Nevertheless, paying attention to this seemingly minor moment in Borges's oeuvre opens up, I think, different approaches—historical and theoretical—to studying the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature from the perhaps limited paths already opened by the likes of Woscoboinik, Saliba, and Molloy. It also has the important benefit of bypassing the debate over the application thesis, against which many authors perform the common apotropaic ritual of warding off any psychoanalytic inquiry into their work. As Borges himself suggests in the 1967 interview with *The Paris Review* that appears as the epigraph, psychoanalysis might help us understand the domain of actually existing peoples and contemporary historical conjunctures. It does not have to confine itself to a method of ahistorical or even sexual inquiry. In the case of "Anotación," Borges chooses Adolf Hitler and the historical conjunction of World War II to essay his psychoanalytic intuition. As scholars such as Stephen Frosh have made clear, the discipline of psychoanalysis—its theories, practices, and ideas—was profoundly marked by Nazism. It is no coincidence then that Freud's radical break with his previous work on the drives occurred concurrently with the rise of Nazism during the interwar period. Borges, I will attempt to show, used the Freudian concept of the death drive to issue one of his most direct and enigmatic statements about the Nazi leader.

BORGES'S GERMANY

Borges's use of the Freudian death drive appeared in an essay that, according to Stavans, "has been insufficiently read, much less studied in detail" (5): "A Comment on August 23, 1944." Written following *la libération de Paris*, a turning point in World War II,¹¹ the article first appeared in the

11 Borges's essay comes on the heels of earlier critiques of Nazi sympathizers in Argentina, particularly his famous 1940 essay "Definición de un germanófilo," which appeared on the front page of the magazine *El Hogar* (no. 13). There, he criticized the pseudo-intellectualism of Argentine lovers of German culture and exposed their "love" of Germany as, instead, mere adoration of Hitler.

120th issue of the literary magazine *Sur*, which was dedicated to celebrating the momentous defeat of the Nazi forces. It was subsequently collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (*Other Inquisitions*, 1952), making it, alongside "Definición de un germanófilo" ("Definition of a Germanophile," 1940) and "Deutsches Requiem" (1946), one of Borges's most widely read essays on Nazism. Founded by Borges's close friend Victoria Ocampo and with which he closely collaborated from its first edition in 1931, *Sur* had not published an essay by Borges on World War II since his piece "1941," at a moment in the War when things seemed to only get worse by the day.¹² "Anotación" was as "timely," in the Nietzschean sense, as it was unremarkable. Like other essays Borges wrote during the period, it offered a predictable diatribe against Nazi sympathizers in Argentina, enumerating their many contradictory beliefs ("incoherences," he calls them). He underscored, for example, the fact that these sympathizers were anti-Semitic at the same time that they professed a religion of Hebrew origin, and that they idolized San Martín, a hero of Argentine Independence, at the same time that they claimed independence from Spain itself to be a mistake. For Borges, the most important sin of Hitler's Argentine supporters was their lack of coherent logical reasoning; he found it, therefore, impossible to reason with them. Borges was quick to point out in the essay that incoherencias ("incoherencias") alone did not exclude them from being able to reason. It was rather their lack of awareness that did. They gave up on rationality when "by behaving incoherently they are no longer aware that incoherence need be justified" ["a fuerza de ejercer la incoherencia, han perdido toda noción de que ésta debe justificarse"] ("A Comment" 210). Such claims about rationality might seem to lead to a Kantian conclusion about human subjectivity. A Kantian view would hold that one must share a common denominator of rationality in order to make possible communication and understanding with others. Any thought that appears irrational—namely, thoughts motivated by religious, emotional, or intuitive reasoning—must thus be justified by appealing to rational concepts. In this way, subjectivity, for Kant, implies complete individual autonomy. Autonomy is as fundamental for Kantian ethics as it is for Borges's characterization of pro-Nazi crowds in Buenos Aires. Hitler's supporters, for

12 See Gómez López-Quiñones, 210-212. This short section by López-Quiñones also contributes one of the only studies specifically on Borges's "Anotación."

Borges, did not act ethically but rather according to a dangerous kind of “enthusiasm” [“entusiasmo”] (210; trans. modified).

The question of autonomy is important for Borges. Such enthusiasm on behalf of Argentine Nazi sympathizers might appear to be completely at odds with Borges’s Kantian reasoning. As in his scattered references to psychoanalysis, Borges struggles to differentiate between individual and collective subjectivity throughout “Anotación.” The difference between interpreting such actions as individual or collective hinges on the question of autonomy. “That crowded day gave me three distinct surprises,” Borges recounts, “the *physical* degree of joy I felt when they told me that Paris had been liberated; the discovery that a collective emotion can be noble; the enigmatic and flagrant enthusiasm of many who were supporters of Hitler” [“Esa jornada populosa me desparó tres heterogéneos asombros: el grado *físico* de mi felicidad cuando me dijeron la liberación de París; el descubrimiento de que una emoción colectiva puede no ser innoble; el enigmático y notorio entusiasmo de muchos partidarios de Hitler”] (210; trans. modified). The Kantian resonances of Borges’s argument deepen upon considering these various forms of collective subjectivity. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), Kant affirms that, “aesthetically, enthusiasm is sublime, because it is a stretching of the powers through Ideas, which give the mind momentum that acts far more powerfully and persistently than the impetus given by sensory representations” (154). By placing it in the category of the sublime, Kant indicates that enthusiasm ought to produce in us a happiness that reason alone cannot satisfy. “It [enthusiasm] is even a *dementia*... where the imagination is ‘unreigned,’” writes Jean-François Lyotard in his study of enthusiasm in Kant. “As such, it is certainly preferable to fanaticism, to the tumultuousness of exaltation, which is an... *insanitas*, an ‘unruledness’ of the imagination, an ‘illness deep-rooted in the soul,’ whereas enthusiasm is a ‘passing accident,’ which can affect the most healthy understanding” (31). Borges, thus, seems to have conceived of collective emotion in the same way Kant thought about enthusiasm.¹³ For Borges, Hitler’s supporters have transformed their enthusiasm from rational into “flagrant enthu-

13 Alberto Toscano (120-38) provides perhaps one of the most thorough accounts of Kant and enthusiasm, tracking the operation of the concept through most of his major works.

siasm," the latter being an objectionable fanaticism that eludes reason. Borges's decision to retain the word "enthusiasm" in his description, thus, indicates this divergence from the Kantian norm. Though their enthusiasm for Hitler may have once been reasonable, his Argentine supporters, Borges argues in 1944, unreasonably ignore the overwhelming amount of evidence that he has committed inestimable atrocities. While there may be much to object to politically about such a statement, it nevertheless seems clear that Borges here was attempting to make a historical argument about the evolution of political support over time and not a normative one about the nature of Hitler's supporters.

In the essay, Borges follows his discussion of the transformation of Nazism's supporters in Argentina with an analysis of Hitler himself.

Nazism suffers from unreality, like [John Scotus] Erigena's hell. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, wound or kill for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph. I shall risk this conjecture: *Hitler wants to be defeated*. Hitler is blindly collaborating with the inevitable armies that will annihilate him, as the metal vultures and the dragon (which must have known that they were monsters) collaborated, mysteriously, with Hercules.

El nazismo adolece de irrealidad, como los infiernos de Erígena. Es inhabitable; los hombres sólo pueden morir por él, mentir por él, matar y esangrentar por él. Nadie, en la soledad central de su yo, pude anhelar que triunfe. Arriesgo esta conjetura: *Hitler quiere ser derrotado*. Hitler de un modo ciego, colabora con los inevitables ejércitos que lo aniquilarán, como los buitres de metal y el dragón (que no debieron de ignora que eran monstruos) colaboraban, misteriosamente, con Hércules. (211; emphasis in original)

Borges's proclamation about Hitler is notoriously cryptic. Several critics have offered interpretations of this admittedly complicated passage. Diego Tatián, for example, contrasts the above pronouncement with the one Borges makes in his short story "Deutsches Requiem." "Deutsches Requiem" was published in 1946, two years after "Anotación." Yet, according to Tatián, Borges's political arguments in both essays are at odds with one another. He argues that the essay on the liberation of Paris "postulates an extraordinary conjecture, an a priori deduction of the defeat of Nazism" while "Deutsches Requiem" "inverts [this conjecture] and establishes an extraordinary thesis: *Hitler won the war, we live in barbarism*" ["se postu-

la una conjetura extraordinaria, una deducción a priori de la derrota del nazismo... invierte lo anterior y establece una tesis extraordinaria: *Hitler ganó la guerra, estamos en la barbarie*] (4; emphasis in original). The idea is that Borges, strangely, seemed more optimistic about Nazism's demise after the war than during it. In 1944, Borges could imagine that even Hitler, "in intimate depths of his being" ["en la soledad central de su yo"], could not wish Nazism to triumph. But by 1946, Germanophilia in Argentina had reached such a fever pitch that a local observer might have thought that Hitler had won the war.

Ilan Stavans, by contrast, reads Borges's statement as a comment of Hitler's perverse desire for martyrdom.

The italicized sentence [*Hitler wants to be defeated*—by Borges himself—is, in my eyes, a paradigm [sic]: Hitler wanted to succeed in his campaign to dominate the planet. The Argentine argued, yet, upon realizing that the endeavor is impossible, he deliberately sought to be crushed, e.g., he indulged in an effort that could only culminate in his own defeat. For this defeat Hitler saw as a triumph: a triumph of evil over good, a triumph of barbarism over civilization. (6)

For Stavans, Borges's reading of Hitler is heroic: although the Nazi leader sought martial victory, the only victory he could achieve was ideological. Martyrdom would give him this ideological victory by preserving and heightening his legacy for his followers. Because his options narrowed after the liberation of Paris, Hitler thus wanted to commit suicide in order to triumph, albeit only ideologically. At face value, such an interpretation seems to but confirm the most widely-shared historical narrative about Hitler during World War II: his ultimate suicide was an attempt to preserve the status of martyrdom.

But Borges's reading points to something very different from martyrdom. It evokes the Freudian death drive, which I will explore in the last section of this essay. Though on Stavans's reading Hitler still "triumphs," such a conclusion seems to directly contradict Borges's own claim that no one could wish Nazism to triumph. Borges's "no one," of course, includes Hitler himself. Put differently, instead of allowing Hitler to become a martyr, Borges relegates him to the status of another man who killed and died for Nazism. To allow Hitler martyrdom—and what is martyrdom if not an attempt to triumph ideologically?—is to confer on him an exceptional sta-

tus that is somehow outside the historical narrative. Simply put, Borges's reading of Hitler does not deify his evil by calling it radical. Key to Borges's understanding of Hitler is his Kantianism. Following the Kantian dictum, Hitler, for Borges, cannot embody radical evil—evil for evil's sake—since such evil does not exist in the material world.¹⁴ Hitler, Borges intimates, approaches the closest embodiment of radical evil civilization may ever witness. Yet, even Hitler, whatever he may proclaim publicly, cannot *unconsciously* bear to see himself triumph: hence, his "blind collaboration" with Nazism's defeat.

The language of the unconscious haunts this passage: "unreality," "intimate depths," "blindly collaborated." Yet Borges critics have so far overlooked not only its psychoanalytic implications but also its profoundly humanist outlook. Following these psychoanalytic road signs allows us to see how Borges evacuates any such rational agency from Hitler, displacing it toward his unconscious. Stavans's reading, via Borges, of Hitler as a martyr presumes that Hitler was fully in control of his own destiny. Note his language: Hitler, for Stavans, "deliberately" sought his own demise, he "indulged" in his own death. This is the language of rational choice. Borges's, by contrast, is that of the unconscious. Borges would like us to think that, martyr or not, Hitler had no rational or conscious control whatsoever over his fate and, indeed, never awakened to the possibility of his own defeat. The Freudian death drive, I will argue, guided Borges's thinking in "Anotación" and made its deepest mark in the closing paragraph of the essay, cited above. Borges's use of this psychoanalytic concept, which Freud would never fully develop, is untimely, also in the Nietzschean sense. Only decades later would Lacan and, subsequently, critics such as Slavoj Žižek further theorize the death drive and give it prominence within psychoanalytic theory. Borges's analysis somewhat anticipates the meaning the death drive would take in the formulations of later psychoanalytic theorists. Not coincidentally, one of the eight mentions of Freud in Borges's oeuvre occurs moments earlier in the essay. Borges rhetorically asks, "Did Freud not argue and Walt Whitman not foresee that men have very little knowledge of the real motives for their conduct?" ["¿no ha razonado Freud y no ha presentado Walt Whitman que los hombres gozan de poca

14 For a detailed account of Kant's understanding of radical evil, see Parts I and II of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, specifically, 69-97 and 101-26.

información acerca de los móviles profundos de su conducta?”] (210-11). At first, it appears that Borges is referencing Luke 23:34: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Not being able to grasp the meaning of one’s actions, the passage explains, is but a feature of life. But the feature is one only gods can perceive; mortals themselves cannot know that they know not what they do. Reading this quote psychoanalytically, the language of “real motives,” far from suggesting stupidity, instead points to the unconscious drive toward a particular end. And this reference to Freud is perhaps the only positive one in Borges’s oeuvre.

FROM CIVILIZATION TO BARBARISM

Before examining the use Borges makes of the death drive, allow me a brief historical detour. Freud’s now famous notion of *Todestrieb* or death drive (also sometimes translated as “death instinct”) made its first appearance in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. After the experiences of World War I, Freud felt the need to drastically overhaul his theories of the drives in order to more readily account for the psychic dimensions of destruction and death. Until then, the libido had figured as the primary psychic force in Freudian psychoanalysis. But *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* posited aggression as its equal. “There are two main hypotheses contained in Freud’s last theory of the drives,” explains Esther Sánchez-Prado: “First, that aggression is a drive equal and opposite to the sexual drive; and, second, that aggression originally takes the form of a self-directed death drive derived ultimately [...] from the fact that living organisms developed out of inorganic matter and there is a need to return to this primitive state” (138). Published less than two years after the end of World War I, Freud’s answer to why humans might need to return to a primitive state came from what he saw as their insatiable desire for war. Throughout *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud wedded the new addition to his theory to the effects of war. “The terrible war which has just ended [WWI] gave rise to a great number of illnesses,” Freud asserted, “but [...] it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force” (10). World War I, in other words, gave Freud the empirical evidence he needed to suggest that traumatic neurosis—more specifically, war neurosis—did not necessar-

ily arise from a physical wound on the body, but also and perhaps more commonly from the psychological impact of what he called a “mechanical force.”¹⁵

From this moment onwards, the death drive no longer appeared as some ahistorical analytic category of psychoanalysis but as speculative concept mediated at its core by the various social and historical developments occurring at a given moment. Gia Pascarelli has explained this historicizing of the death drive by elaborating on Freud’s understanding of technology. “By explaining traumatic neuroses in terms of mechanical violence that entails no direct physical contact with the body,” notes Pascarelli, “Freud raises the possibility of technological influence on the mind that need not touch a person physically. This means that the unconscious in Freud’s psychic system may be vulnerable to stimuli that bypasses the stimulus barrier. It means that the unconscious is not insulated from history or its contemporary agent, technology” (132). For Freud, the effects of war were thus not limited to the soldiers in the trenches—they could affect anyone. This insight opened up the possibility for self-analysis during wartime in a way that remained sensitive to issues of trauma. Freud’s own experience with rising anti-Semitism in Europe might explain his growing sympathy for the non-physical impact of mechanical forces (see Frosh 33-42). Developments during the 1920s, then, might be mapped onto the theory of the death drive itself. These might help explain why Freud decided to make the death drive “an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man [...] that constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization” (81), as he writes a decade later in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.¹⁶ By the time of the publication of *Civilization*, no longer was the death drive

15 Freudian psychoanalysis was not the only tradition of thought to undergo this transformation in the aftermath of World War I. Feminism, too, took a similar path. As Tracie Matysik writes of Helene Stöcker, a “Nietzsche-inspired sexual-liberationist” (361): “Her move by 1919 to accept the endurance of both the life-preserving and life-destroying principles at the core of human subjectivity hence marked a stark retreat from her pre-war optimism. If she was not borrowing Freud’s precise formulation of Eros and Thanatos, her own trajectory from the *Kaiserreich* into the Weimar era mirrored his, as he too only reluctantly accepted something like a death drive after the First World War” (365).

16 Jerry Espinoza Rivera also tracks this development of the concept of the death drive from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle to Civilization and Its Discontents*. For the most important recent study on psychoanalysis and Nazism, see Frosh.

beholden to being a foil for the libido. Freud, in his new study, made it a category unto itself. While the death drive still posed a counter-libidinal force, *Civilization* announced its categorical autonomy.

A corrective to psychoanalytic theories that privileged the centrality of the libido in the ego-instincts, the death drive put on the table a psychoanalytic tool that tied the latter to its contemporary history. In his commissioned biographical work, published between 1923 and 1925, Freud succinctly summarized his efforts during this period, emphasizing what he saw as the two most important components of the death drive:

I have combined the instincts for self-preservation and for the preservation of the species under the concept of *Eros* and have contrasted with it an *instinct of death or destruction* which works in silence. Instinct in general is regarded as a kind of elasticity of living things, an impulsion towards the restoration of a situation which once existed but was brought to an end by some external disturbance. This essentially conservative character of instincts is exemplified by the phenomena of the *compulsion to repeat*. The picture which life presents to us is the result of the concurrent and mutually opposing action of *Eros* and the death instinct. (64)

For Freud, the “impulsion towards restoration” and the “compulsion to repeat,” together, structured the death drive. The second, he noted, animated the first, meaning the act of repetition defined the very restoration of the situation that had once existed. Freud, however, was notoriously elusive about the specific role that death, in its colloquial sense, played in this new drive. Many psychoanalysts have since distinguished Freud’s death drive from, for example, Heidegger’s notion of “being-towards-death,” which in Freudian vocabulary might translate as the “nirvana principle.” Slavoj Žižek, among others, has shed light on the difference between the death drive and the nirvana principle. He has specifically singled out the aforementioned compulsion toward restoration and repetition as markers of that distinction.

The Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with [...] the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying—a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian “death drive” is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for

an “undead” urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. (*Parallax* 62)

Freud’s death drive, according to Žižek, underscored and inverted the destructive power of immortality. Immortality, for Žižek, has less to do with an exalted eternal existence than with a kind of treacherous limbo. To give in to the death drive would, thus, be akin to living in perpetuity without any of the benefits one might associate with living. It is, one might say, endless insignificance.

Martyrdom of the kind Borges’s readers have associated with his reading of Hitler has little to do with the Freudian understanding of the death drive. The immortality generated by martyrdom is often something to be desired precisely because it gives living characteristics to someone who is already dead. Read alongside Freud, Borges’s essay might be understood instead as having questioned the underlying psychic forces that might have driven Hitler to work toward his own destruction, albeit unconsciously. Unlike the death drive, martyrdom requires intentionality. Though the death itself might be deliberate or not, martyrdom serves to preserve, if not expand, a particular ideology. Martyrs, in sum, wish to preserve their ideology and think that the best way of doing so is by suicide. The intentionality behind martyrdom is captured in the phrase ‘to die *for* something,’ which Borges quotes. Their impulse, although psychological, is deliberate, not unconscious.

Borges’s formulation questions the idea that Hitler might become a martyr. It is an understanding of the Nazi leader that he will revisit and revise, given Argentina’s collaboration with exiles from the Third Reich and the fanaticism Borges perceives in many of its supporters. But in the summer of 1944, Borges saw in Nazism an uninhabitable radical evil, meaning that even its professed supporters could not believe in it in any profound sense. It so directly opposed to the *telos* of historical progress, which, for Borges, meant the march of capitalism and liberal democracy, that it “suffer[ed] from unreality.” Its political program was by definition an attempt to start history anew, “a radical intrusion of the ‘death drive’” (*Sublime* 16). “Annihilation”—the term Borges uses to characterize Hitler’s self-destruction—means something very different from its literal interpretation. To read Borges’s provocative formulation—*Hitler wants to be defeated*—in terms of intent is to conclude that Hitler was utterly irrational.

But this reading, which favors Kant's over Arendt's definition of radical evil, assumes that such a position might exist in reality, and not simply be an abstraction (see Bernstein). Borges followed Kant and other rationalists when interpreting Hitler. For Borges, Hitler's collaboration with his enemies was blind, by which he meant unconscious, and hence unintentional.

The act Borges understood Hitler to commit was not an act of self-annihilation; it had nothing to do with, in Freudian terms, the nirvana principle. The nirvana principle, as opposed to the death drive, would read intentionality into Hitler's collaboration with enemy forces. Borges's use of Freud and the unconscious points to a much more radical gesture: an act in which Nazi ideology would cease to have any meaning, and Hitler any life. For Borges, the Freudian death drive served as a counterbalance to the life drives precisely because it extended life infinitely, thereby evacuating any effectiveness, power, force, or meaning it might have once had. More importantly, he underscored the difference between physical and ideological acts of self-annihilation, distinguishing Hitler's immanent death from its perceived impact. For Borges, Kantian moral philosophy already answered the question of evil. Hitler's death, for him, was less a moral one than a psychoanalytic one. "Nazism suffers from unreality" ["El nazismo adolece de irrealidad"], Borges wrote, perhaps referring to the undead nature of immortality in Freud's death drive. "It is uninhabitable," he continued, "men can only die for it, lie for it, wound or kill for it. *No one*, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph" ["Es inhabitable; los hombres solo pueden morir por él, mentir por él, matar y ensangrentar por él. *Nadie*, en la soledad central de su yo, puede anhelar que triunfe"] (211; my emphasis). In Borges's account, it may have been entirely plausible for one to give up one's life supposedly "for" Nazism. But no one, Hitler included, could be its martyr.

Borges, I argue, understood the danger of allowing Hitler to become a martyr. Allowing Hitler the benefit of martyrdom would forever ensure Nazism's existence. If critics made Hitler see his own death as martyrdom, Borges intuits, what is to say that his followers after World War II would not also extract meaning from his death? Welcome or not, it was Borges's Kantian belief in the essential goodness of human nature and the impossibility of embodied radical evil that led him to the conclusion that even Hitler could not wish for Nazism's victory. Transformed historically after

World War I, Freudian psychoanalysis surfaced as a theoretical medium through which Borges might articulate his controversial claim about Hitler. And it was not Jung's collective subconscious, but Freud's individual unconscious Borges was after.

That Borges himself wanted to dissuade others from reading his work with Freudian implications, as his conversation with Burgin suggests, could not be clearer. Yet as I have attempted to show, this comment concerning Hitler and the future of Nazism, when read alongside Freud, indicated that he was much more attuned to Freudian ideas than he and many of his critics have assumed. Borges's psychoanalytic account of Hitler's death drive anticipated the Freudian valence with which the term is often associated today. Because of his persistence in separating his work from the clutches of Freudian psychoanalysis, many scholars have shied away from understanding Borges with Freud in mind. In "Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944," Borges's reference to Freud appeared alongside one to Whitman, a fellow humanist poet whose insights into the psyche from a literary perspective, for some, rivaled Freud's: "Did Freud not argue and Walt Whitman not foresee that men have very little knowledge of the real motives for their conduct?" (210-11). Ultimately, Hitler, in Borges's estimation, had absolutely no knowledge of the real motives of his conduct at all.

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