

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
NOMENCLATURE AND THE CASE OF BORGES' "EMMA ZUNZ"



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In the epilogue to *El Aleph* (1949), Borges juxtaposes two genres - realism and fantasy- and states that all but two of the stories in the volume -"Emma Zunz" and "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva"- belong to the latter. This observation has prompted a number of critics to point out the opposition in this text between, on the one hand -truth, reality, fact, substance- and on the other- ambiguity, appearance, fantasy, absence. Given that this questioning of reality is commonly viewed as a trait of Spanish American Boom fiction anticipated by precursors such as Borges (Shaw *Post-Boom* 5, 35), this notion leads to what critic Donald L. Shaw terms "the hottest topic in the criticism of contemporary Spanish American fiction at this time," namely, the question of names or nomenclature: "Should we speak of the Post-boom, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism, Hyperrealism or what?" ("Skármeta" 153). Consequently, this article proposes an analysis of names in "Emma Zunz," a frequently anthologized Borges text regarded by at least one critic as a near-masterpiece (Stavans 472), in order to shed light on this thorny issue in literary criticism. Because many of the names in this story refer to actual people, places, and things, Borges mana-

ges to create an “illusion of reality” (Dapía 169), which is reinforced by “embedded meanings that provide clues to the characters’ functions” (Milroy and Walsh 20). This typically Borgesian interweaving of literal and symbolic levels results in a complex text in which, according to Milroy and Walsh “[u]ncertainty reigns, and each name, like each new piece of information in the story, is a detail of bifurcating meanings and multiple possibilities” (24).

Before proceeding to examine the names in the story, it is worthwhile to bear in mind the story’s plot outline. On Thursday, 14 January 1922, eighteen-year old Buenos Aires textile factory worker Emma Zunz receives a letter announcing her father’s death, which she interprets as suicide motivated by the scandal of his wrongful conviction for embezzlement six years earlier. Emma blames factory owner Aaron Loewenthal, according to her father the true culprit who got away with fraud to become wealthy and powerful, and devises a plan to seek revenge. On Saturday, 16 January, Emma makes an appointment to meet with her boss on the pretext of giving him information about a possible strike. Before going to his office, however, she goes to a bar and picks up a Scandinavian sailor so that she can be deflowered. When she arrives at the factory office, she shoots Loewenthal with his own gun and telephones the police, claiming that she killed him in self-defense when he tried to rape her. Her story is accepted, and she gets away with murder.

As the title indicates, the story’s protagonist is Emma Zunz. Emma stands out both in Borges’ overall production and in this specific text as a woman. Moreover, she is of German-Jewish descent (her father was an immigrant) and a factory worker, a member of an urban, marginalized working class (Bell-Villada 186). Despite her proletarian origins, Emma’s name evokes eminent literary predecessors: Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse (*Emma*, 1816) and Gustave Flaubert’s Emma Bovary (*Madame Bovary*, 1856). Austen’s Emma, daughter of an indulgent father, meddles in other peoples’ affairs and attempts to plan their lives the way she sees fit while Realist par excellence Flaubert examines the life of an ordinary woman with delusions of romance. Likewise, Borges’ Emma is a devoted daughter who undertakes a grand plan which the author describes in pseudo-realistic detail. Aside from these literary allusions, Emma is also a

contraction or diminutive of her father's name (Emma < Emmanuel) after whom she was obviously christened. Hence, her very name bears the stigma of her father's dishonor (Brodzki "She was unable" 339), and Wheelock even relegates her to the status of "a metaphor for her father" (139). Nevertheless, Emma's motives for revenge may not be so clear-cut as they seem: Is she avenging her father's shame, her own, or perhaps both? This convolution of a seemingly straightforward story of revenge is graphically depicted in the text when Emma's image is fragmented and multiplied in the mirrors of the dock district (Moon 69): "se vio multiplicada en espejos, publicada por luces y desnudada por los ojos hambrientos" (62).

Similarly, Emma's surname, Zunz, implies plural connotations. As already stated, like the other main characters, she is Jewish. Her family name may refer to its roots in the German town of Zons on the Rhine River (Milroy and Walsh 22) and/or be a contraction of the German *zu uns*, meaning *to, with, or toward us* (Lira Coronado 78). Moreover, it is yet another literary allusion, this time to Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), a nineteenth-century German historian of Jewish literature (Álvarez, "La realidad" 32; Fishburn and Hughes 266). Interestingly, both Emma and Zunz are near-palindromes, suggesting a veiled multiplicity while her first name contains double letters (mm), which just happen to mirror the initials of her father's assumed name (Milroy and Walsh 23).

Besides Emma, there are three principal male characters: her father Emmanuel Zunz, factory owner Aaron Loewenthal, and the Scandinavian sailor. After his disgrace, Emma's father, Emmanuel Zunz, changes his name to Manuel Maier and goes into exile in Brazil, where he dies. In other words, Emma's father is known by not one but two different names, and his alias represents his exile (Aizenberg, "Emma Zunz" 230; Milroy and Walsh 22). His assumed name, Manuel, is a contraction of his given German name, Emmanuel, derived from Hebrew and meaning *God with us*, a reference to the Messiah or savior of the Jews. His adopted surname, Maier, is also Hebrew and signifies *the one who radiates light*; like his proper name, it is another appellation for God (Aizenberg, "Emma Zunz" 225).

Another important man in Emma's life is her employer, Aaron Loewenthal, who, according to her father's version of events, framed him for embezzlement and rose to become co-owner of a textile mill. Just as the other names in this text, Loewenthal's conveys multiple impressions. Like Emma and her father, Loewenthal belongs to the Argentine Jewish immigrant community, and he speaks Yiddish. His first name means *the exalted one* and is a Biblical reference (*Exodus* 4) to Moses' older brother and first high priest of the Hebrews; this allusion to "highness" includes both power and spatial structures as Loewenthal now not only owns a business but also lives literally *above* the factory (Milroy and Walsh 22). The surname Loewenthal signifies *valley of the lion* (Álvarez, "La realidad" 32; Milroy and Walsh 22). The names in this tale run the gamut from A(aron) to Z(unz) while the double letters in the middle of the alphabet (MM < Manuel Maier, *Emma*) create symmetry (Milroy and Walsh 23).

The third prominent man in Emma's life is the anonymous Scandinavian sailor she uses as an instrument in her plan for revenge (Alazraki 246). His identity is deliberately indistinguishable so that Emma's crime goes undetected. Their brief sexual encounter awakens Emma's identification with her mother as well as, for some critics, a newfound motive for revenge (Alazraki 245-46; Armisen 304; Bell-Villada 184; Brodzki 339; Chrzanowski 101; Kushigian 211; Murillo 196; Wheelock 142).

Not only the main characters' names (or lack thereof) but also those of secondary characters signal the synthesis of literal and figurative levels in the text. On the one hand, the German-Jewish names, in which double letters proliferate (Elsa Urstein, Perla Kronfuss, Tarbuch, Gauss¹), realistically depict the River Plate immigrant community of the 1920s and on the other, tacitly allude to the sensitive question of Jewish identity in 1940s Peronist Argentina when Borges first published the story (Ludmer 478; Stavans 470). Illusion and reality are literally fused in references to apparently minor but

¹ This name may be an allusion to German mathematician and astronomer Karl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855), known for his contributions to algebra, differential geometry, probability theory, and number theory.

not to be overlooked details. For example, Emma keeps in her drawer a photo of actual stage and screen heartthrob Milton Sills (1882-1930), whose profession epitomizes the illusion of reality. At the outset, she receives a letter from her father's neighbor in southern Brazil whose name is indecipherable but appears to be either Fein or Fain, which brings to mind the English *to feign*, meaning *to pretend, make up, invent, fabricate*.

This semblance of reality with symbolic overtones is further underscored by references to real dates, places, and things. As previously noted, the action of the story takes place during three days (Thursday, Friday, and Saturday: 14-16) in January 1922, and the story opens in ostensibly documentary fashion: "El catorce de enero de 1922, Emma Zunz, al volver de la fábrica de tejidos Tarbuch y Loewenthal, halló en el fondo del zaguán una carta, fechada en el Brasil, por la que supo que su padre había muerto" (OC 1: 59). Nevertheless, the opening paragraph, like the rest of the text, mixes fact and uncertainty (Moon 68). Although Emma is informed that her father died on 3 January in a Brazilian hospital as a result of an accidental drug overdose, she is convinced he committed suicide due to personal humiliation, and the true cause is never clarified. Furthermore, the note Emma receives is of uncertain length, nearly illegible ("[n]ueve o diez líneas borroneadas"), and from an unknown person whose name she cannot even decipher ("un tal Fein o Fain") (59). It should be noted as well, although Borges never overtly mentions it, that the main action of the story takes place on the Jewish Sabbath.

Borges' depiction of the setting is equally precise yet emblematic. He portrays 1920s Buenos Aires and the area where Emma lives and works through the mention of specific local newspapers (*La Prensa*), streets (Liniers, Paseo de Julio, and Warnes), districts (Almagro), and even the public transportation system (Lacroze). This information betrays Emma's lower-middle-class Jewish existence and exposes her search for a sex partner near the slums and bordellos along the river (Fishburn and Hughes 12, 135, 143, 183, 195, 258). Emma's unhappy working-class present contrasts with her more prosperous and lighthearted past when her family lived in a middle-class district (Lanús) and spent summers outside Buenos Aires (in

Gualeguay, in the province of Entre Ríos) (Fishburn and Hughes 102, 137); Emma's father's reputed fraud diminished his daughter's socioeconomic status. The offhand reference to his new address in Brazil's southernmost state (Bagé, Río Grande del Sur), a border area characterized by smuggling (Fishburn and Hughes 27, 205), should alert the reader to the possibility that his criminal conviction may not have been as unjustified as Emma believes (Hall 261). Finally, Emma's scheme leads her to a sailor from a Swedish ship, the *Nordstjärnan*, whose name means *north or guiding star* (Moon 69).

The story's final paragraph calls attention to the precarious and unsettled nature of reality: "La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios" (65-66). As usual, Borges has created a multilayered text in which the veneer of "true" crime fiction masks a profound skepticism about the nature of reality. Borges' meticulous reconstruction of a criminal "case" with its characters and circumstances is ultimately undermined by a symbolic undercurrent in which even the names of people, places, and things challenge the very notion of truth.

This leads back to the issue of nomenclature in Spanish American literary criticism. Does the case of Borges' "Emma Zunz" help us resolve Shaw's question: "Should we speak of the Post-boom, Post-modernism, Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism, Hyperrealism or what?" ("Skármeta" 153). According to Shaw, discussion of specific texts is often missing in postmodern criticism as it can be both risky and illuminating. As suggested here, the analysis of names in this story leads to a questioning of reality, which, along with exploration of the writer's task, are the twin hallmarks of Spanish American Boom fiction which peaked in the 1960s (Shaw *Post-Boom* 5). Borges, curiously enough, is regarded both as a precursor to the Boom as well as a Postmodern writer (Barth qtd. in González Echevarría 66). If, as Robert González Echevarría suggests, "the Modern is equivalent to the Boom, and (...) postmodern is equivalent to the post-Boom" (68), how are we as literary critics to categorize Borges' narrative within Spanish American fiction?

According to Shaw, the matter of nomenclature (Post-Boom vs. Postmodernism) may be separated into three possible positions ("Skármeta"), to which a fourth may be added. In his *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America*, R. L. Williams defines Postmodernism in terms borrowed from European and North American models and unconvincingly attempts to impose this formula on Spanish America. Likewise, Santiago Colás, in his *Postmodernism in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm*, strives to adapt the definition of Postmodernism, which excludes reference to concrete historical and political issues, to accommodate contemporary Spanish American fiction (Shaw "Skármeta" 156). Because both Williams and Colás assert that Postmodernism is self-contradictory, they claim it can simultaneously fail to express truths of any kind as well as describe real political and historical realities ("Skármeta 157). On the other hand, in his *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction* and elsewhere Shaw advocates instead "the desirability of recognizing that many, but by no means all, major contemporary fictional texts in Latin America cannot conveniently be reconciled with any acceptable definition of Postmodernism and that we need an alternative term, which is Postboom narrative" ("Skármeta" 156). Finally, Peter Earle, in an article titled "Back to the Center: Hispanic American Fiction Today", argues against all such terminology: he does "not believe in the Boom, and that disbelief automatically takes care of the Post-Boom" (28). Rather, Earle promotes the idea of a continuity or consolidation of Latin American narrative as a product of both imagination and realism (29).

While Shaw and Earle appear to be on opposite sides of the critical divide, they may not be as far apart as they seem. Both recognize an evolution in twentieth-century Spanish American fiction -from experimentation to a renewed focus on simple good storytelling; however, one endorses whereas the other rejects labels or names. In any case, neither favor application of the term "Postmodernist" to mainstream Spanish American fiction, and after an analysis of the names in Borges' "Emma Zunz," which blend literal and symbolic levels in a manner typical of the Spanish America's best narrative traditions, their position is difficult to disregard. Whether we view Borges as forerunner to the Boom, like Shaw, or as a key agent in the

course of Spanish American fiction, like Earle, we arrive at the same conclusion as at the end of "Emma Zunz:" "in the end, the story is neither 'verdadera' nor 'falsa' but both at once" (Milroy and Walsh 27).

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