

Why is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?

An Interpretation of Borges's "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" and "Emma Zunz"

"Most humans suffer from this intellectual weakness: to believe that because a word is there, it must stand for something; because a word is there, something real must correspond to the word.... As if lines scribbled by chance by a fool would have to be always a solvable rebus!" (Mauthner).

1. Fictional Worlds or a General Theory of Linguistic Deception

Literary critics have drawn connections between Borges's understanding of fiction and the works of several philosophers. Particularly, attention has been paid to Hans Vaihinger, who, in his *Philosophie des Als-Ob (The Philosophy of As If)*, written in 1876 and published in 1911, presents a new criterion for regarding fiction.¹ For Vaihinger, only what is perceived is real; however, in order to give presence to things that cannot be perceived otherwise, Vaihinger introduces three types of ideas: dogma, hypothesis, and fiction (Iser 134). While in *dogma* the idea is identified with reality and in *hypothesis* the idea becomes an assumption that has to be verified, in *fiction*, in turn, the awareness prevails that the idea is the radical "other" to which it

¹ Carter Wheelock, for example, indicates that Borges's conception of fiction partially coincides with Hans Vaihinger's (25-6), while Juan Nuño claims that Borges had Kant in mind, when in 1944 he determined the title for *Ficciones*, his famous volume of stories (42). Floyd Merrell, in turn, relates Borges's nominalistic fiction-making not only to Hans Vaihinger's philosophy of as-if (16-8) but also to Alexis Meinong's world of "mental objects" (23-5; 27) as well as to Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (4-9; 22; 26).

relates (Iser 135). Yet Vaihinger stresses the practical usefulness of fiction; as opposed to the traditional view which regards fiction as a mere example of unreality, Vaihinger understands fiction as a “device” (*Kunstgriffe*) serving to accomplish something that could not be carried out otherwise (Marquard 34-8). Accordingly, Vaihinger acknowledges that something can work *as if* true, even though false and recognized as false (256-60).

Although Vaihinger’s name appears in Borges’s writings, namely, in the story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges admitted not having read Vaihinger’s work (Milleret 24). On the other hand, Borges never concealed his interest in the philosophy of Fritz Mauthner, who also shares many of Vaihinger’s theses² and addresses the problem of fiction. Both Mauthner and Vaihinger—one of the few academic philosophers who thought highly of Mauthner’s work—,³ uncover with their critiques of language “realities” that only exist in language. However, their positions differ primarily in the value that each of them assigns to the usefulness of fiction. Thus, while Vaihinger claims that an idea whose theoretical untruth or falsity is admitted is not for that reason practically worthless and useless (viii), Mauthner, by contrast, completely disregards its usefulness. Certainly, Mauthner is aware of the fact that one can organize societies and operate within them on the basis of “useful,” fictional ideas. However, in his view, it is not enough that a society “functions” if its functioning depends on the most erroneous principles (*Wörterbuch* 2: 570-71).⁴

Mauthner argues that we fall prey to fictions and confusions which are linguistically generated because we assume that words necessarily re-

² Mauthner devotes a whole chapter to Hans Vaihinger’s philosophy and his ideas about fiction, hypotheses and dogma (*Wörterbuch* 1: 25-44).

³ Vaihinger mentions Mauthner in his analysis of paragraph 59 of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, relating Mauthner’s critique of language to Kant’s recognition that “our language” is full of words that are merely linguistic analogies, that is, fictions (*Die Philosophie des Als Ob* 672).

⁴ Vaihinger distinguishes his philosophy from any pragmatism which holds that a statement is true if it is useful in practice. In contrast, he recognizes the necessity and utility of acting on the basis of fictions that are known to be false (viii). Yet it is clear that pragmatism and fictionalism have much in common, especially in their acknowledgment of the significance of heuristic ideals. Mauthner, for his part, rejects any kind of pragmatism. He claims ironically: “True is what works— teaches the English pragmatist Schiller; then all prejudices and mistakes which ever played a part in the mad history of mankind such as the belief in the Devil have been true” (*Wörterbuch* 2: 570-71).

fer to things beyond themselves, that they all are names of independently existing entities (*Beiträge* 1: 158-61). He concedes that some words refer, certainly, to things beyond themselves, as for example the words "water" or "orange." However, they are, in Mauthner's view, mere *hypotheses* about the existence of real entities (*Wörterbuch* 1: 175).⁵ Mauthner points out further that there are other words, ones which look exactly like the former but which do not point to anything beyond themselves—to anything extralinguistic—and he calls "word-superstition" (*Wortaberglauben*) our tendency to think of words as if there always were objects in the world "out there" coexisting with them (*Beiträge* 1: 159). Moreover, he laments that words such as "substance," "god," or "absolute," which cannot be accounted for by our sense-impressions, are deeply rooted in our mind (*Wörterbuch* 2: 119) and sets as a task of his critique of language to uncover the words that posit entities which are not linked to any sensible foundation whatsoever (*Wörterbuch* 1: 175).⁶

Interestingly, the doctrine that claims that we are led to confusion and puzzlement by means of language can be found also in Schopenhauer, whose impact on Mauthner was acknowledged by Mauthner himself (Janik 123-24). Indeed Schopenhauer's account of the way language

⁵ Mauthner seems to suggest the idea of different theories (which will posit different entities) arising from the same basic sensible foundation. He establishes a comparison between our words or hypotheses about the world "out there" and the way an imaginary spirit classifies and orders its sense-impressions. In a single day, according to this spirit's account of the evolution of the earth, the earth separates itself from the basic stuff of the universe, it solidifies, life appears on its surface, and, finally, it freezes, moves towards the sun, and dissolves in the basic universal stuff that has given its origin. Thus, while human beings think of the evolution of the earth as a very long process of millions of years, the imaginary spirit thinks of the concept of earth as at most a sign for a transitory stage of the basic stuff of the universe, which did not last longer than fifteen minutes (*Wörterbuch* 2: 118-19). Indeed two different objects "earth" are posited by our theory of evolution and by the imaginary spirit's theory, based on the same sensible source but using different frames of references.

⁶ By claiming that words must have a sensory backing and that those which lack of it are meaningless (*Beiträge* 1: 497), Mauthner seems to raise the notion of reference (though as reference to sense impressions) which he intended to undermine in other contexts. In other words, if sense-impressions constitute the standard against which words are to be evaluated, it follows that words will necessarily have to refer to our sense impressions. Weiler detects a contradiction in Mauthner's thought and exposes it in the following way: "A fundamental flaw in Mauthner's approach to language becomes manifest here. His skepticism is now revealed as resting on an acceptance of the very same assumptions which he declares as absurd, namely that, ideally, words should refer to realities in the strictest possible sense" (*Mauthner's Critique* 140).

unavoidably leads us into fictions is strikingly similar to Mauthner's, and it can be traced in works such as his *Art of Controversy*, which was published only posthumously, as well as in the essays contained in his *Parerga and Paralipomena*. At first sight, *The Art of Controversy* seems to be a treatise on common fallacies, a mere catalogue of stratagems which give statements the appearance of being sound when they are not. Yet a point that Schopenhauer makes here is that those stratagems are not necessarily dishonest "tricks" which one may use in order to gain a dispute; rather they often arise, according to Schopenhauer, out of language itself (*The Essential Schopenhauer* 176-77).⁷ In a way that reminds us of Mauthner, Schopenhauer contends further that we are held captive by linguistic fictions because we ingenuously suppose that "there must be some meaning in words" (*The Essential Schopenhauer* 194). Also reminiscent of Mauthner are Schopenhauer's endorsement of sensualism as well as his advice about constantly controlling "thought by perception" (*The World* 2: 211). Thus, in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer shows, for example, how words such as "substance," "god," and "perfection" have misled philosophers, particularly Spinoza and Leibniz, into the doctrine of the preestablished harmony, which, according to Schopenhauer, is unquestionably wrong (1: 10-11).

Substantially, Schopenhauer presents a "diagnosis" of the generation of fiction and linguistic deception, which, in turn, will be extensively developed by Mauthner. Thus, Mauthner denounces the ghosts created by word-superstition in metaphysics, theology, science, and political and social affairs (Janik 123). His target is twofold. On the one hand, he criticizes the naive belief that holds that words always refer to something real; on the other hand, he criticizes the acts of taking advantage of this common belief. Yet the second attitude seems to disturb Mauthner much more than the first one: "The theologian who builds a system from the ghost of people's superstition or carries this superstition even further practices a worse fetishism than the simple peasant who only believes in the ghost" (*Beiträge* 1: 160).

In the light of Mauthner's concept of word-superstition, I shall explore here Borges's stories "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" and "Emma Zunz."

⁷ In his dissertation *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813), Schopenhauer locates the source of "sophistry" in language and identifies language with reason; he also quotes here with approval Cicero's parallel identification of *ratio* and *oratio*. However, in *World as will and Idea* (1819), he denies that reason and language, concept and word, could be identical (2: 234-35).

2. Body and Mind: The Pre-established Harmony of Systems

Borges's story, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," takes place in Ireland in 1824. The narrator's name is Ryan; he is the great-grandson of the "young, heroic, handsome, assassinated Fergus Kilpatrick, whose sepulchre was mysteriously violated, whose name embellishes the verse of Browning and Hugo, whose statue presides over a gray hill amid red moors" (*Reader* 151)⁸. Ryan, who is researching the heroic life of his ancestor for a biography, encounters strange coincidences between the circumstances of his great-grandfather's death and those of Julius Caesar's. Thus, just as Caesar received a note he never read which warned him of his assassination along with the traitors' names, so Kilpatrick received, according to the bailiffs who examined his cadaver, a sealed letter which warned him of the risk of going to the theatre where he would be actually killed. Moreover, Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, saw in a dream a tower dedicated to Caesar by the senate fallen to the ground and interpreted it as an omen of Caesar's death; enigmatically, on the eve of Kilpatrick's death, rumors asserting the burning of the circular tower of Kilgarvan, Kilpatrick's hometown, were widespread all over the country and may also be interpreted as an omen of the Irish hero's death. These parallelisms suggest to Ryan the notion of a circular time, "a secret pattern in time, a drawing in which the lines repeat themselves" (*Reader* 152)⁹. Ryan thinks then of "the decimal history imagined by Condorcet; the morphologies proposed by Hegel, Spengler, and Vico; the characters of Hesiod, who degenerate from gold to iron. He considers the transmigration of souls ... he thinks that before the hero was Fergus Kilpatrick, Fergus Kilpatrick was Julius Caesar" (*Reader* 152)¹⁰. However, Ryan finds out that certain words uttered by a beggar who spoke with Kilpatrick the day of his death were prefigured by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. This discovery leads him to abandon his philosophical speculations. Indeed, the series of

⁸ "es bisnieto del joven, del heroico, del bello, del asesinado Fergus Kilpatrick, cuyo sepulcro fue misteriosamente violado, cuyo nombre ilustra los versos de Browning y de Hugo, cuya estatua preside un cerro gris entre ciénagas rojas." (*OC* 1: 496)

⁹ "una secreta forma del tiempo, un dibujo de líneas que se repiten." (*OC* 1: 497)

¹⁰ "Piensa en la historia decimal que ideó Condorcet; en las morfologías que propusieron Hegel, Spengler y Vico; en los hombres de Hesiodo, que degeneran desde el oro hasta el hierro. Piensa en la trans migración de las almas, doctrina que da horror a las letras célticas y que el propio César atribuyó a los druidas británicos; piensa que antes de ser Fergus Kilpatrick, Fergus Kilpatrick fue Julio César." (*OC* 1: 497)

coincidences becomes too perfect not to lend itself to suspicion: "That history should have imitated history was already sufficiently marvelous; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable" (*Reader* 152)¹¹. Ultimately, Ryan will discover the truth.

Ireland was ready for the revolt, but somehow every attempt always failed. The leader, Kilpatrick, entrusted to James Alexander Nolan, the oldest of his companions, the discovery of the traitor who was hindering the revolution. Nolan demonstrated in an indisputable way that the traitor was Kilpatrick himself. Kilpatrick agreed to sign his own death sentence but begged that his crime be kept in secret so that his country would not be harmed. Indeed, the conspirators knew that Ireland idolized him; the minimal suspicion of his infamy might have seriously jeopardized the revolt. Consequently, to prevent the revolt from failing, it was decided that the traitor's identity had not to be revealed to the Irish people. Instead, "Nolan proposed a plan which would make Kilpatrick's execution an instrument for the liberation of the fatherland" (*Reader* 152)¹². Kilpatrick's death would be heroic and at the "hands of an unknown assassin, in circumstances deliberately dramatic, which would engrave themselves upon the popular imagination and which would speed the revolt" (*Reader* 152)¹³. Ultimately, Kilpatrick was assassinated in a theatre; historians claimed that he was killed by order of the English police.

In a first approach, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" seems to be an excellent analytic detective story, whose point is the deductive solution of the mystery of Kilpatrick's death.¹⁴ Moreover, at the beginning, the narrator tells us that this story has been inspired by a master of detective story, Chesterton. Borges was an admirer of Chesterton and devoted an essay to him, "Chesterton and the Labyrinths of the Detective Story." In this essay, Borges not only praises Chesterton's detective stories but gives us a clue as to how to interpret his influence on our story. Borges claims: "Chesterton always performs the tour de force of pro-

¹¹ "Que la historia hubiera copiado a la historia ya era suficientemente pasmoso; que la historia copie a la literatura es inconcebible..." (*OC* 1: 497)

¹² "Nolan propuso un plan que hizo de la ejecución del traidor el instrumento para la emancipación de la patria." (*OC* 1: 498)

¹³ "Sugirió que el condenado muriera a manos de un asesino desconocido, en circunstancias deliberadamente dramáticas, que se grabaran en la imaginación popular y que apresuraran la rebelión." (*OC* 1: 498)

¹⁴ For a definition of an analytic detective story see Irwin 1-12.

posing a supernatural explanation and then replacing it ... with another one from this world" (*Reader* 72-3)¹⁵. Indeed, this characterization applies perfectly well to "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero." Thus, after we learn about the similarities between the circumstances surrounding Kilpatrick's death and those surrounding Caesar's, we are confronted with the hypothesis of a circular time as a possible explanation of these parallelisms: "before the hero was Fergus Kilpatrick, Fergus Kilpatrick was Julius Caesar" (*Reader* 152; *OC* 1: 197). However, this supernatural explanation will be replaced by a rational one: those features of Kilpatrick's death which repeat those of Caesar's, as well as those which are to be found in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, are, in fact, the result of a plagiarism. In order to transform Kilpatrick's execution into an instrument for the liberation of Ireland, Nolan appropriates ideas from "the enemy-Englishman William Shakespeare" (*Reader* 152; *OC* 1: 498) and creates a fictional reality which presents Kilpatrick as an unjustly assassinated hero. Hence, in Chesterton's way, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" proposes a supernatural explanation for a mystery and then replaces it, losing nothing of its aura, with a rational solution. But Borges's story is not restricted to a detective story.

Perhaps a suggestion for a different interpretation can be found in the very same sentence where the narrator admits not only Chesterton's influence but Leibniz's.¹⁶ Borges recalls in a short note in brackets that Leibniz "invented preestablished harmony" (*Reader* 151; *OC* 1: 496). Indeed, the hypothesis of the preestablished harmony represents Leibniz's solution to the problem of cause. Leibniz argues that no thing really acts on another; according to him, when some effect is brought about, no causal agency, no "influx" is transmitted from one thing to another. Instead, Leibniz maintains that laws of nature, already given by god, determine how each individual thing behaves (Ishiguro 113). He claims: "the nature of *a*, and of *b*, is such that, following the laws of nature, the change in one does correspond to change in the other" (Ishiguro 112). Thus, Leibniz elaborates a spectacular metaphysical system where causally segregated substances are designed to function "in phase," creating a vast orchestrated harmony — nothing less intelligent

¹⁵ "Chesterton, siempre, realiza el *tour de force* de proponer una aclaración sobrenatural y de remplazarla luego, sin pérdida, con otra de este mundo." ("Los laberintos policiales y Chesterton" 94)

¹⁶ Jaime Rest considers Chesterton's role in "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," but does not discuss Leibniz's role in the story (108). Michel Berveiller, for his part, does not seem to find a satisfactory explanation for Leibniz's presence in this story either (314).

than god could have composed (Danto 216). In Borges's story, Nolan plays the role of Leibniz's god, orchestrating the acts and words of Kilpatrick with those of the hundreds of people who interacted with him, from the moment he signed his own death's sentence to the moment he fell dead at the theatre. Even the words that Kilpatrick articulated "between two effusions of violent blood" (*Reader* 153; *OC* 1: 498) were prefigured by Nolan. Kilpatrick "entered Dublin, discussed, worked, prayed, reprovéd, spoke words which seemed (later) to be pathetic—and each one of these acts, which would eventually be glorious, had been *foreordained* by Nolan" (*Reader* 153. Italics are mine)¹⁷. Furthermore, as a result of Nolan's orchestration, too, Ryan discovers the truth but decides not to disclose it. "At the end of some tenacious caviling, he [Ryan] resolves to keep silent his discovery. He publishes a book dedicated to the glory of the hero; *this, too, no doubt was foreseen*" (*Reader* 153. Italics mine)¹⁸.

Nolan was acquainted not only with Shakespeare's theatre but with Swiss *Festspiele*, "vast and roving theatrical representations, which require thousands of actors and which reiterate historical episodes in the same cities and mountains where they occurred" (*Reader* 152)¹⁹. Based on this knowledge, he harmonized every single detail related to Kilpatrick's assassination as if it were a vast theatrical representation. "The entire city" was a theater, "the actors were legion," and "the drama which was climaxed by his [Ryan's] death embraced many days and many nights" (*Reader* 152)²⁰. Moreover, the very last act of Nolan's stage play took place in a theater: indeed Kilpatrick was in a theater box, "with funeral curtains, which foreshadowed Abraham Lincoln's" (*Reader* 153; *OC* 1: 198), when a bullet—preestablished, too, by Nolan—finally killed him. Certainly, the pervasive image of the theatre emphasizes the character of illusion or invention of the "official" version of Kilpatrick's death, which is by no means an "objective" account of

¹⁷ "El condenado entró en Dublín, discutió, obró, rezó, reprobó, pronunció palabras patéticas y cada uno de esos actos que reflejaría la gloria, había sido prefijado por Nolan." (*OC* 1: 198)

¹⁸ "Al cabo de tenaces cavilaciones, resuelve silenciar el descubrimiento. Publica un libro dedicado a la gloria del héroe; también eso, tal vez, estaba previsto." (*OC* 1: 498)

¹⁹ "vastas y errantes representaciones teatrales, que requieren miles de actores y que reiteran episodios históricos en las mismas ciudades y montañas donde ocurrieron." (*OC* 1: 197.)

²⁰ "pero de teatro hizo también la entera ciudad, y los actores fueron legión, y el drama coronado por su muerte abarcó muchos días y muchas noches." (*OC* 1: 497)

what really happened. Yet the image of the theatre in conjunction with the mention of Leibniz evokes Schopenhauer's opinion on Leibniz's preestablished harmony. In *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer makes fun of Leibniz, comparing his metaphysical system and its permanent celestial orchestration with what happens on stage when, for example, an actor shoots a weapon and another actor falls injured at the appropriate time thanks to the harmony preestablished by the director of the play (1: 7). Clearly, Schopenhauer rejects Leibniz's metaphysical system because it proposes an image of order that may be appropriate for describing the dynamics of a theatre performance, perfectly controlled by its director, but that is totally ineffective for accounting for the true order of reality. It seems reasonable to assume that Borges shares Schopenhauer's opinion on Leibniz's baroque and grandiose system, for the claim that Leibniz "*invented preestablished harmony*" (Reader 151. Italics mine) emphasizes the view that such a system is an inevitable construction, rather than a faithful and reflexive mirror of reality. However, just as I have claimed that Borges's story is not restricted to a detective story, I also believe that it is not limited either to a parody of a seventeenth-century metaphysical system.

3. A Theory of Ghosts

Significantly in regard to our interpretation, Mauthner refers to Schopenhauer's joke on Leibniz's theory in the article entitled "*Einfluß*" ("*Influence*") of his philosophical dictionary. Here Mauthner argues:

If science had not forgotten how to laugh, it might have realized that the good joke that Schopenhauer once made on the preestablished harmony (*Parerga* 1: 7) can perfectly apply not only to the *influxus animi et corporis*²¹ but also to the new formulations of the old riddle, namely, the way a form of energy becomes another. Schopenhauer compares the preestablished harmony with what happens on stage.... We should remember that Bacon called every system *ghost of the theatre*. (*Wörterbuch* 1: 360)

Elsewhere, regarding Bacon's *Novum Organon*, Mauthner claims:

²¹ Leibniz's theory of the preestablished harmony was his response to the problem of connecting minds and bodies without giving up the concept of substance. Indeed, Leibniz's response was an elaboration of seventeenth-century occasionalism, the theory that assumes parallel series of events transpiring in two independent substances, which cannot, because they are different, interact. The two series of events were viewed like two clocks, one of which strikes ten when the other shows ten, though there is no causal connection from clock to clock (Danto 216).

Once, I translated that curious piece [the *Novum Organon*] into my language, a free translation in regard to the wording, but reliable in regard to Bacon's thought (*Sprache*). Accordingly, I intended to emphasize the conformity of Bacon's doctrine to the skepticism of the critique of language. I, heir of Stirner and of Ibsen, translated Bacon's "idol" into "ghost" (*Gespenster*). (*Wörterbuch* 1: 128)

Certainly, Bacon's doctrine of the idols is one of the most famous parts of his philosophy. For Bacon, the illusions arising from the natural human tendency to assume order and uniformity in things ("idols of the tribe") as well as the prejudices emerging from the characteristics of the individual ("idols of the cave") are to be eliminated.²² Also the illusions due to language ("idols of the market-place") must be, in his view, analyzed and done away with. Ultimately, Bacon notes that there are illusions related to erroneous theories or mistaken laws of demonstration, which impose themselves on uncritical minds, and which Bacon compares with elegant stage plays ("idols of the theatre"). He claims:

Finally, there are idols which have crept into human minds from the various dogmas of philosophies, and also from faulty laws of demonstrations. These I call *Idols of the Theatre*, because I regard all the philosophies that have been received or invented as so many stage plays creating fictitious and imaginary worlds. Nor am I only speaking of present philosophies, nor indeed only of the ancient philosophies and their sects, for numerous other plays of the same kind may yet be composed and contrived, since the most diverse errors spring sometimes from similar causes. Nor again do I mean this only in regard to universal philosophies, but also to many principles and axioms of the sciences, which have become established through tradition, credulity and neglect. (Bacon 55-6)

And in Mauthner's translation of Bacon's *Novum Organon*, Bacon concludes:

The similarity between philosophical systems and the entertainment provided by theatre is really impressive. Even historical dramas are more rounded-off and more elegant, more concerned with satisfying the public's taste than [with being faithful to] the data on which they are based. (*Wörterbuch* 1: 136)

As we have already pointed out, Schopenhauer argues that the impeccable articulation presupposed by Leibniz's theory of the preestablished harmony can never be found in reality itself but only in a stage play. Bacon, in turn, seems to extend Schopenhauer's opinion on Leib-

²² Likewise, Mauthner pointed out our tendency to look out for regularities and order, convincing ourselves that we *find order* in nature, when, in fact, we merely *ascribe a certain order* to the world (*Wörterbuch* 3: 321).

niz's metaphysical system to any philosophical or scientific theory to which experience is somehow forced to conform. In Bacon's view, theories that need to twist experience in order to fit in are like stage plays which represent reality as their authors would wish it to be, not as it is. Hence, the image of the theatre as it appears in Borges's story refers us not only to Schopenhauer but to Bacon. Indeed, by suggesting an association between the "inventor" Leibniz and Nolan, Borges is calling into question not only Leibniz's metaphysical system but any account or representation of reality which, like the "official" version of Kilpatrick's death or Bacon's erroneous theories, pretends to mirror reality while in fact generating a simulation.

Moreover, Borges unmasks here the tyranny of words, their power to generate simulations that correspond to nothing in the world "out there," as well as people's superstitious belief in them. With words, Nolan conjures up the ghost of "the young, heroic, handsome, assassinated Fergus Kilpatrick" (*Reader* 151), and his text becomes reality primarily because of our acritical belief in words, "the power that mankind mostly obeys" (*Wörterbuch* 2: 306). Indeed Nolan practices a much worse fetishism than the one performed by the Irish people, who simply believe in the ghost created by him. Furthermore, not only does Nolan's text impose on the Irish people who witness the revolt but on future generations. Nolan knew that anybody who in the future would discover the truth would have to silence the discovery—if she wished to maintain the *status quo*. Thus, Nolan's fiction, corroborated by Ryan, becomes part of history; his simulation lives out through the mediation of words in texts of history and molds not only the present but the future as well.

Clearly, the conjunction of the "inventor" Leibniz and the image of theatre in "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" refers us to Arthur Schopenhauer and to Francis Bacon, precursor of the critique of language.²³ Notably, the convergence of Leibniz, the image of the theatre, and the role of people's superstitious belief in words refers us to Mauthner. Indeed, Mauthner's critical attitude towards word-superstition becomes in Borges's story, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," a literary topic. However, does Borges intend to *cheat* us when he asserts that our story was written under the influence of Leibniz or, perhaps, does he intend to refer us, by mentioning the great *inventor*, to

²³ About the influence of Bacon on Mauthner see Eschenbacher 129-31.

the infinite superstitions arising from words, so penetratingly defined by Fritz Mauthner?

4. *Whatever Is Referred To Must Exist?*

The story "Emma Zunz" begins with the death of the protagonist's father. Emma, a nineteen-year-old woman from Buenos Aires, learns through a letter that her father, Emanuel Zunz, died in Brazil. Emanuel Zunz had left his country and settled in Brazil after serving a prison sentence for a factory embezzlement. According to his confession to his daughter, he was innocent of this crime, the true criminal being Aaron Loewenthal, Emanuel's former and Emma's current employer. Emma blames Loewenthal for the original injustice as well as for her father's death. Resolving to avenge her father and punish Loewenthal, she plots the perfect crime. At the factory there are rumors of a strike, and Emma phones Loewenthal claiming that she wants to visit him, without other people knowing, to give him information about the strike. During that day, Emma works as usual at the factory, arranges with some friends their Sunday stroll, and in the afternoon she goes to the harbour. As part of her plan, Emma, who is a virgin, has sexual intercourse with a Scandinavian sailor whose ship is to leave Buenos Aires in a few hours. Next she stops by Loewenthal's and shoots him with the gun he keeps in his desk. Ultimately, she calls the police and tells them that Loewenthal asked her to stop by on the pretext of the strike, she did so, he abused her, she killed him.

The usual interpretation of Borges's "Emma Zunz" regards the story as a daughter's successful quest for her father's vengeance and justice. Accordingly, most of the critics seem to agree on regarding Emma as an instrument of justice, punishing a lawbreaker with whom human justice had failed to deal. Carter Wheelock, for example, maintains that Emma takes revenge "in her own name and right upon the man who stole money and caused her father to be accused and exiled and finally commit suicide" (139). John Sturrock, in turn, claims that "Emma Zunz ... avenges the death of her father (which is in fact suicide) by murdering her employer.... She ... will frame Loewenthal just as he framed her father" (68). Ultimately, according to Jaime Alazraki, Emma does carry out an "act of justice" (*Versiones* 65). Certainly, Emma believes that she is an instrument for the execution of justice. But what role does language play in her belief in being such an instrument? Moreover, what role does language play in her peculiar version of Loewenthal's death

and making everybody believe that this version, her own creation of reality, is true? I intend to answer these questions by focusing on three linguistic constructs (justice, father-daughter alliance, and truth) that arise in this story and with the help of Mauthner's notion of word-superstition.

5. *The Temptation of Constructs*

Like Emma's own version of the facts, Borges's story succeeds in creating an illusion of reality through the description of those details that a realistic narrative calls for. Thus, the story begins with two temporal specifications: on January 14, 1922, Emma, a worker in a textile factory, receives a letter posted in Brazil informing her that her father died on January 3. The letter, written by a boardinghouse friend of her father, also specifies the cause of the death: accidental overdose of veronal. Subsequently, the narrator describes the protagonist's reaction to this news:

Her first impression was of a weak feeling in her stomach and in her knees; then of blind guilt, of unreality, of coldness, of fear; then she wished that it were already the next day. Immediately afterward she realized that that wish was futile because the death of her father was the only thing that had happened in the world, and it would go on happening endlessly. (*Labyrinths* 132)²⁴

As required by classic realism, Borges's story offers insight into the protagonist's psychological processes. Thus, the narrator shows us how Emma constructs a pattern of justification for killing Loewenthal. Accordingly, Emma sees herself as an instrument, "which would permit the Justice of God to triumph over human justice" (*Labyrinths* 136)²⁵. Indeed her belief in being a means of the "Justice of God" gives her the necessary strength to surpass the "pathological fear" (*Labyrinths* 133; *OC* 1: 565) that men inspire in her and have sexual intercourse with a stranger, a sailor she picks up in a bar, in her quest for vengeance. It seems as if somewhere along the intricate mechanisms of her mind, Emma equated her father's honor with her own virginity (Murillo 36) and concluded that the latter is to be sacrificed in order to

²⁴ "Su primera impresión fue de malestar en el vientre y en las rodillas; luego de ciega culpa, de irrealidad, de frío, de temor; luego, quiso ya estar en el día siguiente. Acto continuo, comprendió que esa voluntad era inútil porque la muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin." (*OC* 1: 564)

²⁵ "que permitiría a la Justicia de Dios triunfar de la justicia humana." (*OC* 1: 567)

restore the former. Therefore, Emma will submit to the horror of having sexual intercourse with a stranger in the conviction that this is the sacrifice demanded from her by God; this sacrifice, she believes, would preserve the purity of her cause. The narrator states:

Finally she came across men from the *Nordstjaernan*. One of them, very young, she feared might inspire some tenderness in her and she chose instead another, perhaps shorter than she and coarse, in order that *the purity of the horror might not be mitigated*. (*Labyrinths* 134. Italics are mine)²⁶

In addition to a diminished sense of personal agency, Emma also experiments some loss of reality, of a sense of a world “out there.” Thus, at the moment of self-delusion, when Emma regards herself as an instrument of the “Justice of God,” her ability to acknowledge an external world outside her personal situation is partially inhibited. Regarding Emma’s acts on the afternoon of the murder, the narrator comments:

To relate *with some reality* the events of that afternoon would be difficult and perhaps unrighteous. One attribute of a hellish experience is *unreality*, an attribute that seems to allay its terrors and which aggravates them perhaps. (*Labyrinth* 134. Italics are mine)²⁷

Indeed, to look at the external world “objectively” may threaten her project. The notion of a “Justice of God” does the trick. Regarding herself as an instrument of God allows her to eliminate any question whatsoever about the righteousness of her own acts. However, the narrator undermines her construct of justification by a seemingly incidental comment, which is placed in brackets:

Ever since the morning before she had imagined herself wielding the firm revolver, forcing the wretched creature to confess his wretched guilt and exposing the daring stratagem which would permit the Justice of God to triumph over human justice. (*Not out of fear but because of being an instrument of Justice she did not want to be punished*.) (*Labyrinths* 136. Italics are mine)²⁸

²⁶ “Dio al fin con hombres del *Nordstjärnan*. De uno, muy joven, temió que le inspirara alguna ternura y optó por otro, quizá más bajo que ella y grosero, para que la pureza del horror no fuera mitigada.” (OC 1: 566)

²⁷ “Referir con alguna realidad los hechos de esa tarde sería difícil y quizá impropio. Un atributo de lo infernal es la irrealidad, un atributo que parece mitigar sus terrores y que los agrava tal vez.” (OC 1: 565)

²⁸ “Desde la madrugada anterior, ella se había soñado muchas veces, dirigiendo el firme revólver, forzando al miserable a confesar la miserable culpa y exponiendo la intrépida estratagema que permitiría a la Justicia de Dios triunfar de la justicia hu-

The narrator's reference to Emma's possible fear of being punished invites us to question her belief in being an instrument of the "Justice of God." If she believes she is an instrument of God's Will, why does she fear "earthly" punishment? Why doesn't she leave it to God to decide what will happen to her on Earth? In other words: what right does she have to say that she does not "want" to be punished, if she claims to subordinate her will to God's Will? Indeed, Emma's claim to know what is righteous in the sight of God exposes the very notion of a divine justice as a mere human construction, for, if it exists, it is certainly beyond the reach of our knowledge. Furthermore, the words applied by the narrator to her enemy, Loewenthal, might also be applied to some extent to her: "He [/She] was very religious; he [/she] believed he [/she] had a secret pact with God which exempted him [/her] from doing good in exchange for prayers and piety" (*Labyrinth* 136)²⁹. And yet Emma's construct of being a means of the "justice of god" is not the only construct undermined in this story. Also her construct of a solid and enduring father-daughter alliance will be destabilized.

At the beginning of the story, Emma's bond to her father is very strong. Speculating on the possible reasons why she never told anybody about her father's confession that Loewenthal was the real embezzler, the narrator claims: "perhaps she believed that the secret was a link between herself and the absent parent" (*Labyrinth* 133; *OC* 1: 564). Not surprisingly, Emma's fixation with the paternal figure seems to displace the maternal figure of her childhood memories:

In the growing darkness, Emma wept until the end of that day for the suicide of Manuel Maier, who in the old happy days was Emmanuel Zunz. She remembered summer vacations at a little farm near Gualeguay, *she remembered (tried to remember) her mother, she remembered the little house at Lanús which had been auctioned off, she remembered the yellow lozenges of a window....* (*Labyrinth* 132-33. Italics are mine)³⁰

humana. (No por temor, sino por ser un instrumento de la Justicia, ella no quería ser castigada)." (*OC* 1: 567)

²⁹ "Era muy religioso; creía tener con el Señor un pacto secreto, que lo eximía de obrar bien, a trueque de oraciones y devociones." (*OC* 1: 567)

³⁰ "En la creciente oscuridad, Emma lloró hasta el fin de aquel día el suicidio de Manuel Maier, que en los antiguos días felices fue Emanuel Zunz. Recordó veraneos en una chacra, cerca de Gualeguay, recordó (trató de recordar) a su madre, recordó la casita de Lanús que les remataron, recordó los amarillos losanges de una ventana..." (*OC* 1: 564)

However, Emma's encounter with the sailor will disrupt the traditional father-daughter alliance (Brodzki 53). Thus, at the moment of her relationship with the sailor, Emma reenacts the parental intercourse and identifies herself with her mother. Indeed, Emma's identification with her mother has been already prefigured through the image of the yellow lozenges of the little house at Lanús, which first appears in the context of her childhood memories. Significantly, the image of the lozenges reappears in connection to the place where Emma's sexual intercourse with the sailor takes place, suggesting thus the new mother-daughter alliance:

The man led her to a door, then to a murky entrance hall and afterwards to a narrow stairway and then a vestibule (in which *there was a window with lozenges identical to those in the house at Lanús*)... (*Labyrinths* 134. Italics are mine)³¹.

Like the fracture of the construct of divine justice, the undermining of the father-daughter connection is achieved by the voice of the narrator:

During that time outside time, in that perplexing disorder of disconnected and atrocious sensations, did Emma Zunz think *once* about the dead man who motivated the sacrifice? *It is my belief that she did think once, and in that moment she endangered her desperate undertaking. She thought (she was unable not to think) that her father had done to her mother the hideous thing that was being done to her now.* She thought of it with weak amazement and took refuge, quickly, in vertigo. (*Labyrinths* 135. Italics are mine)³²

So great is Emma's feeling of violation, that it makes her ally her mother against her father and forget that the act of giving herself to the sailor was part of her own plan for restoring her father's honor. In fact, in Loewenthal's presence Emma can only represent herself. For Emma, Loewenthal has become a substitute for her father and by killing him she is avenging herself for her traumatic experience with the sailor (as well as her mother for "the hideous thing" that her father had done to her, *Labyrinths* 135). The narrator claims:

³¹ "El hombre la condujo a una puerta y después a un turbio zaguán y después a una escalera tortuosa y después a un vestíbulo (en el que había una vidriera con losanges idénticos a los de la casa en Lanús)..." (OC 1: 566)

³² "¿En aquel tiempo fuera del tiempo, en aquel desorden perplejo de sensaciones inconexas y atroces, pensó Emma Zunz *una sola vez* en el muerto que motivaba el sacrificio? Yo tengo para mí que pensó una vez y que en ese momento peligró su desesperado propósito. Pensó (no pudo no pensar) que su padre le había hecho a su madre la cosa horrible que a ella ahora le hacía. Lo pensó con débil asombro y se refugió, en seguida, en el vértigo." (OC 1: 566)

In Aaron Loewenthal's presence, more than the urgency of avenging her father, Emma felt the need of inflicting punishment for the outrage she had suffered. She was unable not to kill him after that thorough dishonor. (*Labyrinths* 136)³³

Emma shoots Loewenthal and tells the police a story that she will repeat many times as an explanation of what happened: "Something incredible has happened... Mr. Loewenthal had me come over on the pretext of the strike... He abused me, I killed him..." (*Labyrinths* 137).³⁴

6. Can Narratives Be True? Truth, Fiction, and the Intricacies of Plot

Loewenthal is dead, Emma's father is avenged, and her story is believed by everybody. The narrator explains:

Actually, the story *was* incredible, but it impressed everyone because substantially it was true (*Labyrinths* 137)³⁵.

Admittedly, Emma creates a coherent narrative. She selects certain events, such as the imminent strike, her stopping by Loewenthal's, the loss of her virginity, and her killing Loewenthal, and imposes a plot upon them, creating a causal relationship between the selected events that is absent in the external reality she claims to describe. The result is that Emma's narrative seems to be explanatory and account for her presence at Loewenthal's place as well as for his death. Yet the question arises as to what the narrator means when he claims that Emma's account is "substantially ... true" (*Labyrinths* 137).

According to a correspondence criterion of truth, a sentence is true if it corresponds to the facts. Certainly, as the narrator suggests, *some* separate descriptive sentences of Emma's narrative are true: "True was Emma Zunz's tone, true was her shame, true was her hate. True also was the outrage she had suffered..." (*Labyrinths* 137)³⁶. However, Emma's account does not offer a true overall description of what did

³³ "Ante Aarón Loewenthal, más que la urgencia de vengar a su padre, Emma sintió la de castigar el ultraje padecido por ello. No podía no matarlo, después de esa minuciosa deshonra." (OC 1: 567)

³⁴ "Ha ocurrido una cosa que es increíble... El señor Loewenthal me hizo venir con el pretexto de la huelga... Abusó de mí, lo maté..." (OC 1: 568)

³⁵ "La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta." (OC 1: 568)

³⁶ "Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido..." (OC 1: 568)

happen; by contrast, her account is *misleading*, for it implies facts which are evidently false.³⁷ That this is so is suggested by the narrator himself, who, by means of one of his “incidental” comments, highlights some of those facts that are implied by Emma’s true sentences and that are irrefutably false: “the circumstances were false, the time, and one or two proper names” (*Labyrinths* 137)³⁸. And just as the narrator has previously undermined Emma’s construct of divine justice and that of a father-daughter alliance, he undermines here another construct: a criterion of truth that is based on *some* true sentences rather than on an *overall* fair description of things.

And yet everyone believes Emma’s narrative, like Nolan’s text in “Theme of the Hero and the Traitor.” As Mauthner observes, we tend to superstitiously think of the words of our language as if they always had a backing in reality (*Beiträge* 1: 158). And because we feel we ought to be able to identify the reality to which words correspond, we either assume the existence of it or simply invent it (*Beiträge* 1: 158). Thus, the people who listen to Emma *assume* that her narrative corresponds to reality just as the Irish people who witness Kilpatrick’s “performance” *assume* that there is a real hero behind Kilpatrick’s (Nolan’s) words. Both stories seem to illustrate Mauthner’s claim that people generally believe that “because a word is there, something real must correspond to the word” (*Beiträge* 1: 158). Indeed, “Emma Zunz” can be read as embodying the dangers of word-superstition in two ways. On the one hand, the people who are confronted with her neat and coherent narrative assume, obeying the spell of words, that her skillful weave of words—and not incidentally Emma works at a textile factory—corresponds to the facts. On the other hand, Emma herself obeys the power of words; notably, the words “justice of god” exert a fascination upon her and mislead her into her quest for Loewenthal’s punishment. Furthermore, the realistic tone of Borges’s “Emma Zunz” also acquires its meaning within this context.

Emma’s account of what happened and a realistic narrative have certainly something in common: both of them are imaginary constructs which intend to make people believe that they are synonyms with the

³⁷ Borges’s distinction between true separate sentences and a true total description of reality reminds us of Mc Cullagh’s account of truth of historical narratives (Murphy 296-98).

³⁸ “sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios.” (*OC* 1: 568)

"real."³⁹ However, the narrator's "perhaps" applied to Emma's thoughts, perceptions, and motivations⁴⁰ do not only color the story with uncertainty but encourage the reader to regard his (the narrator's) own statements as mere conjectures rather than as faithful representations of reality. Thus, this partially omniscient narrator, with his lack of certainty, reminds us of the precarious status of our verbal constructions. He reminds us that "because a word is there," this does not mean that "something real must correspond to the word" (Mauthner *Beiträge* 1: 158).

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³⁹ Borges has argued in several contexts against realistic discourse, particularly against its attempt at making us forget its status of "verbal artifice" (*Reader* 123). Thus, in his essay "Narrative Art and Magic" (*Discusión*, 1932) Borges strongly argues against a realistic fiction that pretends to duplicate the causality of the world "out there," defending by contrast a fiction that follows the causality of magic (*Reader* 37-8). In a similar vein, in his prologue to Bioy Casares's novel *La invención de Morel* (*The Invention of Morel*), Borges attacks the psychological novel for its pretense to be realistic, whose result consists in showing that "no one is impossible. A person may kill himself because he is so happy, for example, or commit murder as an act of benevolence. Lovers may separate forever as a consequence of their love. And one man can inform on another out of fervor or humility" (*Reader* 122; "nadie es imposible: suicidas por felicidad, asesinos por benevolencia; personas que se adoran hasta el punto de separarse para siempre, delatores por fervor o por humildad..." OC 4: 25).

⁴⁰ The narrator reveals uncertainty and thus a "partial omniscience," for example, in his use of "perhaps" in contexts referring to Emma's psychological motivations: "Since 1916 Emma had guarded the secret. She had revealed it to no one, not even to her best friend, Elsa Urstein. *Perhaps* she was shunning profane incredulity; *perhaps* she believed that the secret was a link between herself and the absent parent" (*Labyrinths* 133; italics are mine. "Emma, desde 1916, guardaba el secreto. A nadie se lo había revelado, ni siquiera a su mejor amiga, Elsa Urstein. Quizá rehuía la profana incredulidad; quizá creía que el secreto era un vínculo entre ella y el ausente." OC 1: 564). Similarly: "Emma lived in Almagro, on Liniers Street: we are certain that in the afternoon she went down to the waterfront. *Perhaps* on the infamous Paseo de Julio she saw herself multiplied in mirrors, revealed by lights and denuded by hungry eyes, but *it is more reasonable to suppose* that at first she wandered, unnoticed, through the indifferent portico ... (*Labyrinths* 134; italics are mine. "Emma vivía por Almagro, en la calle Liniers; nos consta que esa tarde fue al puerto. Acaso en el infame Paseo de Julio se vio multiplicada en espejos, publicada por luces y desnudada por los ojos hambrientos, pero más razonable es conjeturar que al principio erró, inadvertida, por la indiferente recova..." OC 1: 565).

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