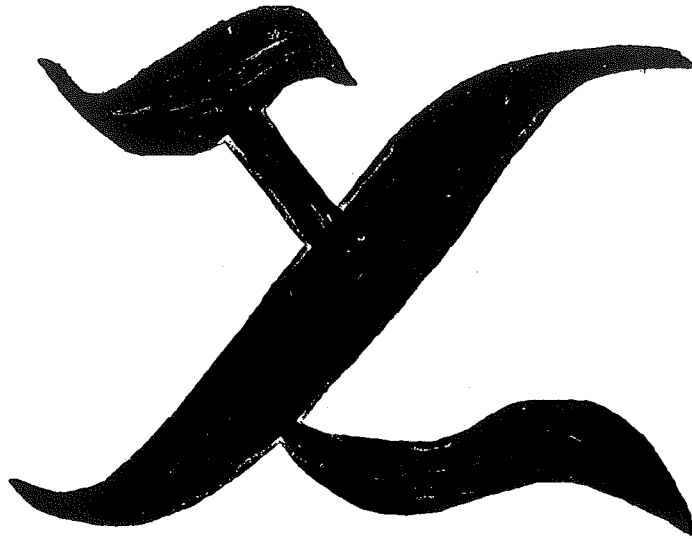
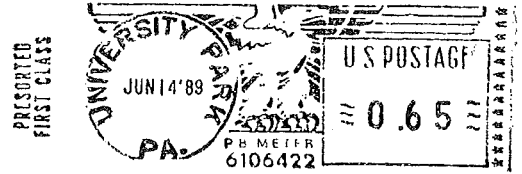


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'He was unable not to name':

### Names in Borges' "Emma Zunz"

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Proper names in literature create expectations in the reader that narrators of Borges's fictions only occasionally and partially satisfy. Readers expect descriptions of named characters; they expect personality traits to be ascribed to those characters. Names, functioning as historical, geographical and extra-literary allusions, elicit emotional responses from the readers. In "El Aleph," the name Beatriz immediately evokes Dante's beloved. "Aleph" readers expect a context of love and might be disappointed not to find their expectations completely fulfilled.

"Emma Zunz" creates an entire network of expectations in its title alone. First, the reader expects a character named Emma Zunz to be the protagonist of the story, a surprising occurrence, as Borges creates few central female roles and takes a woman's name as the title of no other story. Readers also note that the name of the title character is not Hispanic. Thirdly, Emma, like Beatriz, is a charged literary name, evoking important characters of Jane Austen and Gustave Flaubert. Thus, the title itself creates and begins to fulfill expectations that the succeeding narration will continue to exploit in relation to this and other proper names.

In "Emma Zunz," Borges chooses character names with embedded meanings that provide clues to the characters' functions in the plot. This story's title, promising a female heroine by a writer who more often ignores women, immediately attracts a feminist reading. Kabbalistic tradition not only highlights meanings embedded in the story of this young Jewish-Argentine woman, but also reveals vital connections between character names and functions that could easily go unnoticed by readers unversed in that tradition. The story presents a group of characters with non-Hispanic, rather Germanic-sounding names (Zunz, Loewenthal, Tarbuch, Kronfuss, Urstein), indicating a transplanted community in Argentina; changed names, uncertain names and silenced names all suggest the themes of translation and transplantation. The changes, uncertainties and absences of names deflect the fixity of characteristics expected for each name. Such

multiplicity invites a deconstructive reading of the text. These multiple readings complement each other in a study of the nomenclature of this story, bringing out the diversity, transformation and dispersion of its meanings.

The names in "Emma Zunz" form a constellation of meanings that underlies the story's plot and structure. Emma is a young Jewish virgin in Buenos Aires who works in the Loewenthal-Tarbuch factory. As Borges's narration begins, she learns of her father's death via a letter from Brazil. Her father, Emanuel Zunz, had changed his name to Manuel Maier after being implicated in a crime at the factory where Loewenthal was manager. As Emma grieves over the loss of her father, she also grieves over what she perceives as the injustice of his absence from her life during the six years since the theft incident and his subsequent banishment, and she vows to avenge his death by killing Loewenthal. She arranges for a meeting with her boss regarding current rumors of a strike at the factory. On her way to meet Loewenthal, she has sexual intercourse with an unnamed sailor. She then proceeds to Aarón Loewenthal's office to accuse him of "killing" her father, and shoots him. She is never sure if he hears her well-prepared accusation: "He vengado a mi padre y no me podrán castigar . . .";<sup>1</sup> as he dies, she calls the police, justifying her murder as self-defense from rape.

Despite the homogeneous-sounding community of the chosen German-Jewish Argentine names, their meanings set up immediate tensions and power struggles in a story full of ambiguity. As Edna Aizenberg points out in her study, Emma is a shortened form of her father's Emanuel meaning "God is with us."<sup>2</sup> She is the piece of him left behind--presumably the only child, the only Zunz in the family line, the sole member of her nuclear family as well, since her dead mother is but a vague memory: "recordó (trató de recordar) a su madre" (564). Emanuel goes to Brazil without any family, leaving behind the "em-" ("with"), isolating himself from his only child and from his own identity (Aizenberg 230). Already inscribed in his surname is a sense of

<sup>1</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974) 567.

<sup>2</sup>Edna Aizenberg, "'Emma Zunz': A Kabbalistic Heroine in Borges's Fiction," *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, ed. Daniel Walden (Albany: State U of New York P, 1983) 225.

isolation or exile. Zunz comes from Zons, a town on the Rhine;<sup>3</sup> Emanuel's two names thus represent double exile, once to Argentina, then to Brazil. In leaving his German-Argentine community, he leaves behind his place-derived name.

Emma, the only part of her father remaining in Argentina, takes on the role of justice and manifests her version of the truth. Maier, her father's new surname, means "the one who radiates light" (Aizenberg 225); Emma draws on that light and makes herself into an instrument of divine justice, "la intrépida estratagema que permitiría a la Justicia de Dios triunfar de la justicia humana" (567).

Aarón Loewenthal's name reveals important underpinnings to his role in the story's structure of relationships. Aarón means "high priest," "mountain high," and "enlightened."<sup>4</sup> Thus this personage is in charge of holy organizations, stands above others, and possesses the truth. At the beginning of the story, upon Manuel Maier's death, Aarón is the only remaining individual through whom the reader has access to the truth about the crime at the factory. (Emma, twelve years old at the time, received a secretive version, which she retains with filial loyalty, consistent with her name's linguistic heritage and dependence.) The "high"-ness referred to in Aarón's name creates spatial as well as power structures. Not only does Loewenthal become owner of the factory, but he also lives above the factory. Emma traverses the city to meet the sailor in a lower, darker, unfamiliar area where the ships come in to dock, and then rises to kill her boss. However, Aarón's last name, meaning "valley of the lion,"<sup>5</sup> provides a balance. The animal reference offers an image of strength and leadership, while the valley mediates between mountain and sea.

<sup>3</sup>Benzion C. Kaganoff, A Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History (New York: Schocken, 1977) 210.

<sup>4</sup>Edna Aizenberg, The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1984) 98, and Christopher P. Andersen, The Name Game (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977) 196.

<sup>5</sup>Elsdon C. Smith, Treasury of Name Lore (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 102; and Kaganoff 172-173.

In addition to the Judaic and Germanic content of the names, the story also makes use of the Kabbalistic tradition that assigns a numerical value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. "Emma Zunz" is certainly not the only Borges narrative that plays with letters and numerology. In "The Aleph," the central symbol of the story draws on this numerical system: the aleph, being the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, holds a value of one; yet the vision's "one-ness" contains the totality of the universe. The eventual destruction of the aleph is related to three characters whose names begin with "Z". In "Emma Zunz," the exiled father as Manuel Maier creates an alphabetical symmetry between Aarón and Zunz, as "m" falls exactly in the middle of the Spanish alphabet; Emma retains her double "m" and cancels this symmetry by doing away with Aarón.

Indeed there is a plethora of double letters in the names of "Emma Zunz," whose sonorities underscore semantic affinities between the characters. Emma, with its double centered "m", is almost a palindrome, as is Zunz. Elsa, Emma's best friend, echoes Emma in her name's four letters and two syllables; Emma, Elsa and Perla create an assonant rhyme. The members of this rhymed trio are close friends of similar age who work together, go to the same club, and are the only named females in Emma's world and in the story. Aarón's name begins with a double vowel, while many other names have double consonants: Kronfuss, Gauss, and Sills. The double letters and echoed vowel structures enhance the symmetry from "a" to "z". Borges initially ties Emma to other characters through these poetic and Kabbalist bonds, yet all bonds are eventually broken, until, at the end, Emma stands alone.

Death in this story eliminates knowledge of truth. Emanuel's death occurs in several stages--first by the death of his name through disgrace and banishment, then by the lack of his physical presence in Emma's life, and finally in his historical, bodily death. His physical death is either an accident, a poisoning or suicide. According to Emma, Loewenthal is responsible for her father's unjust exile and his eventual death. Yet, in murdering Aarón she eliminates the possibility of resolving the uncertainties, and rises to authority of her own fiction. She is the author of the last crime, and becomes the final editor of the first.

The Jewish tradition behind the names offers both symmetry and polarity. Rather than providing definite answers to the complexities of the story, the Kabbalistic elements contribute to the multiplicity of meanings and versions of the plot in "Emma Zunz." As Aizenberg points out, both Borges's narratives and the Kabbalist

scriptures consist of multilayered texts, full of esoteric mystery, hidden meanings and ambiguity. The Kabbalah is “a paradigm for secular, human writing, the kind of writing Borges admires--and produces” (“Emma Zunz”: A Kabbalistic Heroine” 225). The Old Testament and mystical Judaic references also lead into the Christian ideas of sacrifice and justice.<sup>6</sup> Emanuel Zunz is doubly crucified, once by implication in the crime, and then by dying in exile. Emanuel dies for Aaron’s sins. Emma then represents God’s daughter, a female reflection of Christ. This story emphasizes oral interpretation, with information or misinformation transmitted through others’ words. Emma is bombarded with confusing linguistic cues. In the notification of her father’s death, Emma is unable to decipher the name of the correspondent. “Fein” or “Fain” evokes “to feign,” implying deceit or perhaps an imposter or traitor, a Judas figure. The author of the letter does not know that Emma is the dead man’s daughter. Uncertainty reigns, and each name, like each new piece of information in the story, is a detail of bifurcating meanings and multiple possibilities.

Deciphering the names in “Emma Zunz,” for both readers and characters, is in many cases a process of translation. Borges often exploits translation, with all of its intertextual possibilities, including references to translations and to translators in many stories, most notably “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” “El informe de Brodie,” and “El evangelio según Marcos.” He presents the boundaries of real and imaginary languages and their texts, in an “espace sans frontières . . . cet espace courbe où les rapports les plus inattendus et les rencontres les plus paradoxales sont à chaque instant possibles.”<sup>7</sup>

However, in “Emma Zunz,” translation does not serve to facilitate understanding between remote languages and cultures in a utopian universal communication system, but rather disperses meaning and provides an obstacle to communication. Translated names in “Emma Zunz” contribute to the refraction of meanings, to the

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<sup>6</sup>Daniel Sibony describes the New Testament as “un régime d’écritures entièrement organisé autour de la citation.” For a discussion of the resonances and echoes of the Old Testament in the New Testament, see his chapter VII, “Le coup christique,” *La juive: une transmission d’inconscient* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1983) 269.

<sup>7</sup>Gérard Genette, “L’Utopie littéraire,” *Figures I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 130-1.

confrontation of otherness and exile. They evoke “the shadowy yet unmistakable contours of the coherent design from which, after Babel, the jagged fragments of human speech broke off.”<sup>8</sup> Emma, like most of Borges’s characters, must face the task of translation alone. She is deserted because of her father’s exile; not even his name remains intact. Derrida identifies exile with translation: “Dès l’origine de l’original à traduire il y a chute et exil.”<sup>9</sup> In keeping the “secret”—about her father’s name, his exile, the crime—Emma exiles herself from her own history and her community: “Emma, desde 1916, guardaba el secreto. A nadie se lo había revelado, ni siquiera a su mejor amiga, Elsa Urstein” (564). She has sex with a man with whom she cannot speak, deliberately choosing the sailor for whom she feels no affinity or affection. She then shoots a man who dies before hearing what she has to say. She experiences an array of frustrated lost attempts at communicating, and translates her frustration into revenge, but a secret and private revenge which she will not allow anyone else to decipher.

Borges has been noted for “his distinctive way of making literature its own commentary,”<sup>10</sup> an observation that certainly holds true in regard to the nomenclature of “Emma Zunz.” In this story of multiple meanings, the deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida have to be included as one of the required commentaries. Deconstruction—opposed to all closure or fixity of meaning—attacks texts that claim to be founded on an ultimate truth or unimpeachable ground, showing how they inevitably betray their own logic and collapse. Derrida invents différance, playing with the meanings differ, defer and disperse, to refer to the resistance of any kind of settled meaning.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) 64.

<sup>9</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph R. Graham (London: Cornell UP, 1985) 232.

<sup>10</sup>Bella Brodski, “‘She was unable not to think’: Borges’s ‘Emma Zunz’ and the female subject,” *MLN* 100.2 (1985): 330.

<sup>11</sup>Différance is derived from three sources: the French verbs to differ (in kind or quality) and to defer (in time), and the Latin verb differe (to scatter or disperse).

This play of differences is at work throughout "Emma Zunz," in both the names and the plot structured around them. The guilty party of the crime is never determined, nor is the cause of the father's death ever fixed. The guilt, the innocence, the love, the hatred, the desire and the vengeance are dispersed among the sailor, Loewenthal and Emma's father. The vengeance for a crime committed six years earlier is deferred until after the father's death. The man who rapes Emma differs from the man who dies for that rape. Two men die (Maier and Loewenthal) for a crime of which they might both be innocent. One man dies (Loewenthal) for a crime of which all men are guilty. Although it is the sailor who violates her virginity, her father, Loewenthal, and the entire male population are implicated in this act: "[Emma] Pensó (no pudo no pensar) que su padre le había hecho a su madre la cosa horrible que a ella le hacían" (566, our emphasis). The use of the plural "hacían" creates further ambiguity. The grammatical impersonal of the third person plural points to the anonymity of the sailor, the sole character who remains nameless. The plural could also point to Emma's fear of all men, as well as her combination of resentment (due to her father's absence) and hatred (of Aarón). Thus even in the most anonymous, alienating, mechanically organized moment in Emma's plot, the embedded namelessness of the antecedent(s) splits into an array of named and unnamed possibilities. Meaning in this story is deferred and dispersed; there is no center; and the story can only be understood when the reader accepts the diversion, the multiplicity and the play of differences.

Emma's father has been silenced by death, yet he wields more power over Emma after his death, not an unprecedented occurrence:

Fatherless now, you must deal with the memory of a father. Often that memory is more potent than the living presence of a father, is an inner voice . . . governing your every, your slightest movement, mental or physical.<sup>12</sup>

Reading the letter telling her of her father's death seems to awaken that inner voice in Emma: "Ya había empezado a vislumbrarlos [los hechos ulteriores], tal vez; ya era la que sería" (564). Her identity emerges from her loss.

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<sup>12</sup>Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) 144.

Emma is fighting for her name, to restore family honor, to replace or regain a lost and exiled identity. "La traduction devient alors nécessaire et impossible comme l'effet d'une lutte pour l'appropriation du nom" (Derrida 214). Emanuel Zunz had to translate himself out of one community into another, and now Emma, who cannot translate him "back," must seek revenge. Emma's translation involves an attempt to recuperate her own name through the pursuit of her father's lost one, "dette insolvable a l'intérieur d'une scène généalogique" (Derrida 220).

Emma's search for a name results in her emergence as author of her story. In order to regain her father's unified identity, she transforms herself into a sexual being. In confronting "the murder of the paternal logos,"<sup>13</sup> Emma faces the otherness of death, sexuality and injustice. She triumphs over them in her inheritance of the "parenté des langues" (Derrida 220); from this kinship, she engenders her own story.

However, this very kinship is shattered, leaving Emma alone. She is the sole remaining character and the sole author of the final fiction. In silencing Aarón, Emma seals all secrets; only after those secrets are sealed away does she gain a voice. Even having gained a voice, she speaks only to absent, unnamed characters, in order to impose her narrative upon those authorities. Although the "em-" of Emma means with, Emma is never with anyone. Her story begins with Emma, alone, reading a possibly feigned version of her father's death; so too does it end, with Emma, alone, reciting an impossibly feigned version of Loewenthal's death. Borges ends the story with the assertion that Emma's version "sustancialmente era cierta" (568), forcing the reader to concede that truth and falsity are no longer mutually exclusive terms. The reader must accept that play of differences, for in the end, the story is neither "verdadera" nor "falsa" but both at once.

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<sup>13</sup>Christie V. McDonald, ed., *The Ear of the Other. Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Schocken, 1985) 98.