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Fiction in Pain: Mourning and Melancholia in Borges's *Emma Zunz* and *El Aleph*

Ficción en el dolor: duelo y melancolía en *Emma Zunz* y *El Aleph* de Borges

Resumen

En este artículo, propongo un análisis de la representación del duelo y la melancolía en "Emma Zunz" y "El Aleph," de Jorge Luis Borges. Parto de una reconceptualización de los términos duelo y melancolía: desde la base freudiana, reviso ambos conceptos para argumentar que el trabajo de duelo se trata de una actividad colectiva que depende de marcos sociales, y que la melancolía deviene de la imposibilidad del marco de duelo para procesar y significar una pérdida. Después, discuto la representación del duelo en ambos cuentos, el cual, resulta difícil de resolver pues las condiciones del marco social de duelo no permiten al deudo experimentar la pérdida.

Abstract

In this article, I analyze the representation of mourning and melancholia in Jorge Luis Borges's "Emma Zunz" and "El Aleph." First, I propose a reconceptualization of mourning and melancholia. Starting from Freud's premises, I rethink both concepts to argue that mourning is a social activity anchored on social frames and that melancholia comes from the impossibility of the social frame of mourning to carry and signify a loss. Then, I discuss how the short stories represent mourning processes that, in both cases, are difficult to achieve since the social conditions do not allow the mourner to grieve.

Someone could state that all the possible thoughts about Jorge Luis Borges's literature have been said. However, scholars keep digging into the Argentinian's oeuvre and sometimes form the same understanding. Any fiction has the power to project an incommensurable range of senses, guided by the exegete ambitions, horizons, and previous readings—this is especially significant if we characterize interpretation as a complex built on the nexus between texts of different genres and traditions which join in designing the meaning of another text. There are infinite possibilities for approaching a literary work. Nevertheless, what happens with texts—such as "El Aleph" (*Sur*, 1945) and "Emma Zunz" (*Sur*, 1948)—that are central in the Latin American literary canon? My first guess is that Borges's hermeneutics is centralized. His privileged position in the Latin American—and perhaps "universal"—literary system has led researchers to read him from a few points of view—that we can call "Borges's interpreting machine"—: Freud's psychoanalysis, intertextuality, cabala, mirrors, labyrinths, textual repurpose.[1]

Usually, scholars base their approaches to Borges's writing on the idea that he destabilizes the empiric reality with fictional statements that deploy *truth* codes and diegetic universes—with their own tautological meaning's complex—that

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[1] Recent studies have nourished the considerations around textual repurpose. Borges's literature organizes a complex system that recycles his literary works and surrounding productions to maximize meaning (see: Cajero Vázquez; Corwin). Borges tries to build a recursive literature that requires reaching through materials and epochs to verify how the author negotiates with the past in projecting a new oeuvre. Recontextualizing constitutes an exercise designed to play with the reader and broad meaning (for an extended perspective on Borges's textual repurpose, see: Cajero Vázquez). Furthermore, we should consider the impact of manuscripts in rendering Borges's literary works. In this line, the critical edition of "El Aleph," published by El Colegio de México, the collection *Cuentos*, published by Borges Center, and the book *How Borges Wrote*, by Daniel Balderston, could be helpful to the scholars interested in the impact of materiality and textual repurpose in "El Aleph" and "Emma Zunz," along with the thoughts of Antonio Cajero Vázquez in *Borges* recicla *a Borges*.

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problematize deep concepts (cf. Infante 33). Such tendency leads us to think of Borges's literature as an erudite meaning machine that dilutes concrete objects according to some—or many—philosophic trends and as a system in dialogue with a tradition rich in ideas. Hence, in consonance with the labyrinth and mirror games, Borges's machine of senses generates semas that *bifurcate and reproduce* as looking through a fractal.

In the case of "Emma Zunz," commonly conceived as an irregular criminal fiction, there are four regular paths for interpretation: a Freudian, linked to Oedipus and Elektra complexes in which justice/vengeance turns into a resource to revenge social and familiar violence against women and lumpen (Aedo Fuentes; Aizenberg, *Borges*; Brodski, "She was..."; Brodski, "Borges"; Fuente; MacAdam; Priel; Sarlo); one in debt to intertextuality and feminism that understands the short story in relationship with Biblical Judith and other strong —and murderer— women in the tradition (Aizenberg, "Emma Zunz"; Corwin; Fuente; Moon; Rivera-Taupier); the third, that reflects on the value and role of naming characters —this includes a variation: the extratextual references of the diegesis —(Aedo Fuentes; Maier); finally—this is important since it impacts on this essay—, the one that ponders the function of truth, and misreading and misinterpreting the *reality* —according to the secret—that allows Emma to build a narrative full of meaning, but in tension with the *actual truth* of the diegesis (Briseño; Concha; Dapía; Duchesne Winter; Gerez Ambertín; Ludmer, "Las justicias"; Ludmer, "Mujeres"; Rivera-Taupier; Rojo).

The reading schema for "El Aleph" is distinct: the critics think of it mainly as an erudite text whose matrix lies in irony and satire (cf. Abadi). The range of interpretations crosses a huge path, starting with the role of Beatriz Viterbo as the axis of the plot (cf. Bratosevich 551), continuing in a satire of the Argentinean literary community embodied in Carlos Argentino Daneri (Concha; Landgraf), followed by one that links «El Aleph» to cabala and Judeo-Christianism (Aizenberg, *Borges*). Perspectives that join in one that postulates truth mechanisms and meaning multiplicity as wires of the narration (Abadi; Bratosevich; Cabrera Torrecilla; Concha; Infante). Also, this perspective allows us to think of «El Aleph»

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as a non-centralized short story. In other words, one reading goes to another, generating a multiple-meaning machine in which hermeneutics constantly mutate.[2]

Although a contemporary approach to any Borges work needs to negotiate with the critical tradition, it should not be seduced by it. Then, it is fundamental to take into account three factors: on the one hand, "Borges no sentía la menor estima por Freud" (Abadi 39), which opens the lens to avoid any Freudian *prejudice*; on the other hand, Borges was an emotional and mundane writer, interested in passion, lost and love (cf. Abadi 34); finally, that Borges's machine structure meaning using contiguity figures as metonymy and synecdoche (Alazraki; Bratosevich). Therefore, in this article, I present a reading of the representation of mourning and melancholia in "El Aleph" and "Emma Zunz" from a non-centralized attitude. My perspective moves the Borges's interpreting machine center: I will argue that Freud's conceptualization of mourning—and melancholia—obscures the social aspects of bereavement from a deconstructive point of departure; then, I will *analyze* the literary representation of mourning and melancholia as processes rooted in a community: *one only achieves effective* mourning when he *mourns* with others; *melancholia* is not a sickness, rather than the impossibility *to share* the pain and to be *accompanied*.

The first part of this essay discusses mourning and melancholia to re-conceptualize both terms widening Freud's ideas with notions from Derrida, Butler, Durkheim, and Leader; the second part constitutes the textual analysis of "El Aleph" and "Emma Zunz." I hypothesize that the mourning represented in these short stories depends on the collective, not the individual. Emma Zunz and the fictional Borges are not melancholic subjects because their suffering cannot be characterized as an inherent condition but the result of the impossibility of grief in the diegesis.

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[2] Even though the narrator of "El Aleph" says "Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten; ¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca?" (Borges, "El Aleph" 138), that does not mean that this is the actual center of the short story (see: Bratosevich).

What if Freud misread?: (re)figuring mourning and melancholia

A 21st-century understanding of the work of mourning requires returning to Freud to (re)think throughout two of the most important, helpful, and equally controversial categories in many fields —from psychoanalysis to critical theory—: mourning and melancholia. In the first half of 20th-century, Sigmund Freud defined the work of mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, or so on" (Freud 243). Someone grieves when he losses; however, grief is not a coarse reaction but a complex process. Nonetheless, where is loss rooted? Furthermore, how is loss signified? After someone loses someone or something, a community joins him to provide comfort and company and to remember the departed: funerals are collective rituals to overcome death, signal it and make sense of it. This small fact shows a few directions of the work of mourning: it is primarily linked to social practices because a community helps to overcome the loss and depends on remembering collective processes.[3]

The next step in problematizing the work of mourning involves looking deeper into Freud's logic. For him, grieving relates to narcissism and libido. Freud proposed that the nexus with something beloved depends on libido; that means that, when someone experiences a loss and to accomplish effective mourning, he needs to replace the *dearness* and the object with another that shares characteristics and performs the same role in the libidinal schema. Hence, when the work of mourning fails and melancholia rises, there is an egomaniac translation in the object of desire: in the absence of another thing to love in the same way, the subject internalizes the loss against himself, producing a narcissist interiorization, the door to melancholia

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[3] To learn more about the collective aspect of memory, see the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Astrid Erll, Aleida and Jan Assman, and Paul Ricoeur.

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(cf. Freud 245–51). Such perspective means that every object is replicable, that every person that leaves our empirical reality can be replaced—perhaps *should* in the Freudian conception of the human intercourses. This conception also shows how much Freud's thoughts were amalgamated with Capitalism: for him, even interpersonal relationships could be produced—and (re)produced—infinitely as another wealth in the market. However, no mourning exists in individuality. Communities signify losing and allow mourning. In the same axis, we can place the fact that there are no equivalent ties:

> la muerte del otro, no únicamente pero sí principalmente si se le ama no anuncia una ausencia, una desaparición, el final de *tal* o cual vida, es decir, de la posibilidad que tiene un mundo (siempre único) de aparecer a *tal vivo*. La muerte proclama cada vez *el final del mundo en su totalidad*, el final de todo mundo posible, y *cada vez el final del mundo como totalidad única, por lo tanto irremplazable y por lo tanto finita.* (Derrida, *Cada vez única, el fin del mundo* 11)

Every bond is unique, and no one can be replaced. Loss and the *process* that implies overcoming after the ineludible closure of a contingent world are different from replacing an old overcoat whit a new one from a department store; these are closer to total annihilation: something irreplaceable goes forever without the opportunity of getting it back. Thus, mourning does not try to change the object of desire, avoid suffering, or renounce pain by supplanting it with a new item. In contrast, it is the process to accept an absolute end of a contingent word—signed by the present, past, and future relationship established with the loss—in the frame of another contingency—the empirical reality. In other words, the work of mourning can be described as the series of devices with which the mourner actualizes the image and bond with someone or something beloved in which the one that remains accepts the annulment of the possibility of a reunion (cf. Leader 25–26). At the same time, the mourner reaches to understand the loss as a

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(re)writing of the experiential parameters shared with the absent. Reality is never going to be the same.; however, the mourners are still alive. To inhabit the new reality, they need a community of grief (see: Diéguez) to *(re)set* the meaning of reality and accept that it has changed forever.

The work of mourning plays with the components of remembering, with the traces of something we care about: it dissembles, dislocates, and relocates them to show a new stage, a new contingency, the one of bereavement; accordingly, "one mourns when one accepts that the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (Butler, *Precarious* 21). Successful work of mourning does not respond to the logic of substitution, termination, or forgetting the loss; neither it wants to order the chaos left by the end of a contingency. Instead, it aspires to accept the change that the loss implies; so, it could be said that mourning deals with naming and then ontologizing the lost one and the loss itself (cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 8–9).

Every human relationship carries the knowledge that someone will see die (or will lose) the other. To love someone turns into a finite bond marked by the finitude of mortality: the future pain alerts us even in the presence of the other who, in any minute, could become an absence (Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* 105; Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 3 and following). Then, mourning fluctuates inside a particular social frame,[4] whose directions manifest when a relationship

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[4] I understand *social frame* in Durkheim's way: the group of semiotic aspects that allow organizing, signifying, and giving structure to collective dynamics while providing sense to the individual within the society in which he develops. Furthermore, social frames do not contain anything, nay they draw the general notions of human intercourses: "This suggests that the conception of the social frame, as a whole, was conceived as social soul: an ideality contained within a body conceived as a material, physical condensation or crystallization acting as a 'support,' but not as a simple epiphenomenon of it" (Gane 79). In this sense, social frames of mourning could be characterized as the spaces which allow the emergence and conclusion of the work of mourning; because of it, they are related to the treatment given to the dead in a specific time and space. Consequently, that life could not be grieved does not imply the absence of a social frame of mourning; instead, it shows the prohibitions or limits established by the values of the community. Finally, these frames change constantly, reformulating their conditions. For a complex

begins or evolves. Although the loss of someone implies the extinction of a contingent world for the mourner, this contingency exists only enclosed in the empirical and social reality. Therefore, even though every pain is fundamentally unique, it can only be valorized between a community's limits: to navigate pain and loss, human beings need to socialize their mourning, metamorphosing it into a *collective* pain.

Mourning depends on a social frame that signifies—according to the group's shared principles—the lost and validates the mourners' pain by accompanying them in their quest. Accordingly, "Emile Durkheim has described mourning as less an individual process of grief than an imperative of the social group; less a movement of private feeling wounded by the loss than the duty imposed by the community" (Leader 72). Because of that, the mechanisms deployed to assimilate loss do not respond to a process of reparation or reordering of the human psyche; instead, they pursue to adapt the personal loss to the public sphere in which the griever looks for comfort since "[p]ublic mourning is there in order to allow private mourning to express itself" (Leader 76). Comfort and company can only come from peers; honoring the departed and grieving for them become tasks for the living that should be shared: no successful mourning comes from the personal space; it claims to be socialized. Others confirm the loss and accompany the mourner during the transformation process; collective structures ritualize and symbolize death and annihilation (see: Thomas). In this sense, dealing with loss as an individual — especially in the hiper-individualization processes carried by Neoliberalism— usually results in a partial or failed work of mourning. According to such reasoning, it is fair to state that achieving in overcoming a loss is directly linked to the role of the social frames of mourning.

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understanding of the social frames, see *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* by Émile Durkheim.

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Now, it is time to revisit the famous and terrifying melancholia. Since Freud's pioneer approaches,[5] the knowledge around melancholia has defined it as the counterpart—in binary opposition—to mourning. It has been conceptualized as the pathology that affects a mourner when he cannot effectively process the loss. Perhaps, Capitalism's goal to keep producing without considering the human impact and the subjects involved in accumulation has led to locating melancholia in the negative specter of the work of mourning. That is why some approaches state that if one cannot overcome during the *right* amount of time and as an individual, he is sick.

However, melancholia is not a hostile element nor a sickness: my perspective understands it as part and complement of the work of mourning. It founds its basis in a failure in communication, not narcissist interiorization. Social frames—that depend on the socialization of the pain caused by the loss—found and operate the work of mourning; also, to accomplish grieving, a community should stand up upon the mourner to comfort him and carry part of the agony. Thus, melancholia can be characterized as non-socialized mourning. When someone cannot express his pain or share his loss, and nobody accompanies him, he becomes melancholic. This failure incarnates a bigger problem: the impossibility of social frames of mourning to value and validate some losses. The reasons for the social frame's breakdown are broad; nevertheless, they join in a common point:[6] that pain for some losses is not socially acceptable according to the community's values. The rule of meaning—perhaps even its moral—is caring: we grieve successfully for things society allows us to care about. Social standards efface the opportunity to mourn when grieving attempts against the *right* and defy the rules to express

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[5] Although Freud changed the history of melancholia, it was a word used in different contexts, usually to talk about major depression. The works of Starobinski could help reflect on the history of the concept.

[6] Judith Butler's reflections on war and violence are significant to illustrate this point: she thinks how political and social spheres negate the value of life and transform some lives in ungrievable to design a perfect machine that characterizes a conflict as fair (see: *Precarious*; *Frames*; *The force*). This is relevant because she shows the operation of social frames of mourning in liminal and extreme contexts.

emotions publicly and organize society. That is the actual melancholia: the impossibility of mourning anchored in the exclusion of public expression of pain, the alienation of the social frame of mourning, which denies the possibility to name, elaborate and ontologize loss, and being accompanied. A non-performed loss will never heal. Literature negotiates with these elements when representing works of mourning, and the primary resource to do so is contiguity figures: metonymy and synecdoche.

Metonymy works on contiguity by semantics: this figure substitutes a word or a complex structure, such as an image, using the semantical links between the elements in play. As I said before, mourning is linked to memory. This is not free; this informs of a profound nexus: semantics configure memory, also mourning. That implies that there could be *equivalent semas* in different bereavements. In contexts with mourners suffering distinct losses, one mourner could give company and comfort to another because their grieves are profoundly related and overlap; additionally, one can mask his mourning by contiguity to heal in oppressive environments. Memory accumulates events using a semantic thread, and mourning does the same.[7] Mourning enchains one suffering to another; this is the reason why by talking about one loss —in a synecdoche— a mourner can grieve another: the part for the whole, there is no substitution of pain, just a playful and accomplice contiguity that allows speaking, raising the voice, about a pain not permitted.

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[7] For a long time, melancholy—meaning the mood disorder that in our days we identify as major depression and not as the consequence of a trunked work of mourning—was associated with the creative frenzy; however, today, we know that it is false: major depression compromises the neurotransmitters that allow creativity (Ramírez-Bermúdez). Following Ramírez-Bermúdez, melancholy—understood from my point of view: non-successful mourning because of lack of socialization—finds in fiction a tool to face the loss that cannot be communicated in other contexts. Consequently, fiction about loss could perform socialization that allows fighting the absence of a social frame of mourning, turning into a key to a successful work of mourning.

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"…la muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido…": Emma Zunz's mourning

«Emma Zunz» refers reading processes; the protagonist reads a letter from Brazil informing that his father has passed away: "La engañaron, a primera vista, el sello y el sobre; luego, la inquietó la letra desconocida. Nueve o diez líneas borroneadas querían colmar la hoja; Emma leyó que el señor Maier había ingerido por error una fuerte dosis de veronal y había fallecido el tres del corriente en el hospital de Bagé" (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 61). Later, the narrator reveals that the sender ignores the identity of Emma: "Un compañero de pensión de su padre firmaba la noticia, un tal Fein o Fain, de Río Grande, que no podía saber que se dirigía a la hija del muerto" (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 61). These statements, along with the fact that Emma probably supposes that his father committed suicide over dying of accidental overdoses, suggest to the critics that the protagonist misread the situation to justify her vengeance: she acts upon her own values to create both a past narrative and a future horizon to characterize herself as a God's will instrument; she pens a private *story* distinct from the public one—that in in which her father is a thief—; and she needs to reach to an ending in its own terms (cf. Gerez Ambertín 170).

Perhaps, Emma became a bad reader whose capacity to relate with the world got stained by her lack of interpretation (Briseño 146; Dapía 170; Rojo). Emma renders a reality that does not agree with the terms of her empirical and social environment. However, it is not enough to profile her as a bad reader; instead, it shows a crisis in the mimetic process: if mimesis reinterprets a reality and produces a (re)presentation negotiating with the terms of the *actual world* (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe; Ricoeur), that means that such world has displaced Emma because she does not comprehend its rules nor its agreements. Thus, Emma is outside the considerations of the community's network. Because of that, she cannot signify reality with its codes, giving her the margin to act according to her goals which *only* she understands.

Emma's distance from social values and rules to conceptualize the world originates in two facts: first, she cannot doubt his father's version of the events because doing so equals destabilizing and questioning the idyllic past that she yearns for (Rivera-Taupier 70); second, the only one with whom she can review—and later interpret based on the examination of the events —the narrative that she chooses to believe in suddenly died. Emma's supposed inability to interpret does not cause the breakdown in the interpreting chain. Instead, the impossibility of communicating with others her version collapses the hermeneutics of the past— then the meaning of his father's death —leading Emma to a situation in which she needs to face loss in her terms, in this case, revenge.

Nothing else happens since Emma read the letter, only her father's death: "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" (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 61). This event becomes absolute. The contingency is destroyed, and the promise of rencounter breaks since she learns that reality has changed without the possibility of turning back. Also, Emma needs to grieve her father's death and accept the modification of the reality that it implies. Nevertheless, as I argued before, the mourner needs the group's company and the social vindication of his pain to transit the work of mourning successfully. Emma does not have such a network because the others around her have decided to untie Emmanuel Zunz's life from humanity since he was a thief, traitor, and exiled. The exile becomes significant at this point: it is the gesture to pull out Emmanuel from the caring system of the society in which Emma habits. Meanwhile, the same group negates the possibility for the young woman to mourn.

Furthermore, Emma decides not sharing her family's past neither the death of Emmanuel Zunz—and the events that it caused—: "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. Loewenthal no sabía que ella sabía; Emma Zunz derivaba de ese hecho ínfimo un sentimiento de poder" (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 62).

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She cannot assign meaning to her pain and turn it into experience, because the *events* claim to be socialized to metamorphose them into human time.

The schema gets even more complicated: on the one hand, the secrecy compromises the rise of the social frame of mourning; on the other hand, she actively chooses to act in a rush for revenge. She decides for the last because she does not process the loss: Emma works on behalf of melancholia, which is why she claims retaliation. It is essential to point out that she does not have only one *loss*. Emma losses three things in the short story: her family, her father, and her body—do not forget that the sailor raped her. The chain of losses begins with the separation from infancy, characterized as an idyllic space:

> Recordó veraneos en una chacra, cerca de Gualeguay, casita de Lanús que les remataron, recordó el auto de prisión, el oprobio, recordó los anónimos con el suelto sobre "el desfalco del cajero", recordó (pero eso jamás lo olvidaba) que su padre, la última noche, le había jurado que el ladrón era Loewenthal. (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 62)

She never socialized the loss of her childhood; it remained unmourned and, because of its link to his father's exile, turned into the axis to articulate the other losses. That confirms that the impossibility of a practical social frame of mourning lies in the fact that the social conventions effaced Emmanuel Zunz's honor and, therefore, removed him from humanity and retired the care that he deserved as a member of the group, which—by extension—means to bury Emma's pain and to neglect her the possibility of mourning.[8]

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[8] At this point, it is necessary to remember that the characters in "Emma Zunz" are Jews, and that was very important for Borges, as the manuscript reveals: "Whoever the typist was, he or she was not familiar with German-Jewish surnames, since this is what Borges most frequently corrects in the typescript" (Balderston 185). Even though the typist mistyped Borges's scripture, he insisted on the Jewish identity of his characters. The lack of accompaniment turns especially significant given that during Shiva, Jews offer their respect using the phrase: "Hamakom yenachem etchem b'toch she'ar aveili Tzion v'Yerushalayim" ["That the Omnipresent comforts you besides the

To accomplish her goal, she needs to build reality: "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" (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 64). Emma opts for a third loss to face the previous: the reparation system—also the social frame of mourning —gets compromised by a regulation originated on the individual agenda of pain that does not perform in terms of the work of mourning but according to the rules of vengeance, her version of justice. The need for revenge deprives the work of mourning; melancholia becomes a constant for Emma Zunz. Nevertheless, she cannot be described as a melancholic subject since her melancholia corresponds to the incompatibility of her loss with the social frame of mourning. Here the presence of God as the facilitator for revenge/justice becomes crucial: Emma cannot signify her loss and neither express public mourning nor melancholia with the current social frame of mourning; thus, she appeals to a higher standard, the divine. However,

> Even if one wanted to, one could not let the dead bury the dead: that has no sense, that is impossible. Only mortals, only the living who are not living gods can bury the dead. Only mortals can watch over them, and can watch, period. Ghosts can do so as well, they are everywhere where there is watching; the dead cannot do so—it is impossible and they must not do so. (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 219–20)

The only man, who could accompany Emma through her suffering, died. He became a ghost; specters cannot be part of the apparatus that allows the social frame of mourning to rise. She turns to God to gain some company in her quest, and Gods —immortals and specters too— neither participate in the work of mourning. She is alone, unable to socialize her life experience, holding the secret of her father's death, carrying mourning alone. Her melancholy could turn into a

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mourners of Sion and Jerusalem"]. This understanding of mourning claims a community to mourn with.

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permanent scare. Nevertheless, the end of the short story could tell a different conclusion: "Luego tomó el teléfono y repitió lo que tantas veces repetiría, con esas y con otras palabras: Ha ocurrido una cosa que es increíble… El señor Loewenthal me hizo venir con el pretexto de la huelga… Abusó de mí, lo maté…" (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 68). Although she does not refer to the actual events, she uses metonymy to discuss her losses. Loewenthal was the real traitor and a liar, the origin of her loss. She kills him and *broadly* restores the order of things with a false but contingent and realistic new truth:

> 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. (Borges, "Emma Zunz" 68)

Nonetheless, she does not tell the *truth*; she creates one (cf. Aedo Fuentes), an independent narrative that condenses all her losses in one resolution: the murder of Aaron Loewenthal. Maybe, we can read the end as an opportunity to socialize ungrievable losses in societies that do not allow the mourner to express himself —herself in this case— using the power of metonymy: when the context does not accept some truth, one can mask it. The losses in Emma's life are anchored in the separation of her family and the violent ending of her childhood; these unite in the same *continuum*; therefore, she can express her pain and perform mourning in a chain. Grieving for the last loss allows her to restore all the past. However, she chooses to keep her secondary story: she does not have company since nobody—besides God—can signify and share her narrative. Additionally, her inability to relate to others comes from the fact that she is a Jew: the unalienable and *constant* remembering of the exile, diaspora, and *galut* affected her social bonds, putting her in a place where she cannot rely on others. Finally, her fake account could lead to

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a fake mourning—or at least a contingent one. The resolution of Emma's work of mourning seems ambiguous.

"Cambiará el universo pero yo no…": the pain for Beatriz

When someone cares for another, he accepts the eventual separation. Bounding with someone represents the departure point of *forthcoming* bereavement, oriented by the principle of fidelity: "*philia* begins with the possibility of survival. Surviving—that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited. For one does not survive without mourning. No one alive can get the better of this tautology" (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 13–14). When someone dies, we try to keep his memory and defend the impression we hold of him; also, we need to overcome the fact that the relationship got lost forever. The fidelity principle shows that mourn implies accepting the importance of the other in our life as a component of our vulnerability. The loss of the other, then, comprehends the loss of one himself, of the symbolic tie for the survivor, elaborated in/from the other (cf. Butler, *Precarious* 22).

"Cambiará el universo pero yo no, pensé con melancólica vanidad" (Borges, "El Aleph" 125). The fictional Borges tries to adequate a world in change to the static picture of Beatriz Viterbo. He negates the possibility of admitting that time keeps going because that could erase the image of his beloved one. This attitude could lead to describing the fictional Borges as a melancholic subject. However, the work of mourning depends on the collectivity that allows the mourner to ontologize the loss: "It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 9). The loss is localized, and its name is Beatriz; nevertheless, the fictional Borges does not have conditions for the *semantization*—the conceptual operation to assign meaning—of his loss to occur since the terms of the affiliation do not exist beyond him: the bond he built on

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Beatriz and that he implied from her. Then, he cannot communicate his pain or receive the group's comfort; even though the community *allows* the mourning for Beatriz, it is not the mourning that the fictional Borges needs.

The lack of validation and company turns the image of Beatriz into a constant; it does not change according to the transformation of the reality that her death carries; it seems out of time and space. The mourner has no place to express his remembering of his beloved one, neither has the chance to communicate the qualities of his loss. Ultimately, he was only a man who loved Beatriz Viterbo and whose inclination was never reciprocated. Beatriz turns into a monument that the fictional Borges venerates: "alguna vez, lo sé, mi vana devoción la había exasperado; muerta, yo podía consagrarme a su memoria, sin esperanza pero también sin humillación" (Borges, "El Aleph" 125). She becomes a specter: the present absence always imminent (cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*). Beatriz's role in the short story converts into a virus; it infects everything in the diegesis: "Todos esos Viterbo, por lo demás... Beatriz (yo mismo suelo repetirlo) era una mujer, una niña, de una clarividencia casi implacable, pero había en ella negligencias, distracciones, desdenes, verdaderas crueldades, que tal vez reclamaban una explicación patológica" (Borges, "El Aleph" 136). Even when the narrator pretends to describe the other members of the Viterbo family, Beatriz's specter invades the account.

It is significant that "El Aleph" begins with the image of Beatriz's death: "La candente mañana de febrero en que Beatriz Viterbo murió, después de una imperiosa agonía que no se rebajó un solo instante ni al sentimentalismo ni al miedo" (Borges, "El Aleph" 125), and ends with another reference to her in which the fictional Borges declares his worries about the possibility of forgetting his beloved one: "Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz" (Borges, "El Aleph" 144). The short story circles around: the center or the narration is not the Aleph—as the fictional Borges claims before describing this fantastic object—, but Beatriz (Bratosevich 551). She rules and gives meaning to every action, to every

space; the diegetic universe configures according to her: "No me resultó muy difícil compartir su congoja. Ya cumplidos los cuarenta años, todo cambio es un símbolo detestable del pasaje del tiempo; además, se trataba de una casa que, para mí, aludía infinitamente a Beatriz" (Borges, "El Aleph" 135). In counterpoint to Emma Zunz, the fictional Borges can name his loss, his Beatriz. He does so constantly; he does not lose any chance to bring her to the conversation:

> Nos despedimos; al doblar por Bernardo de Irigoyen, encaré con toda imparcialidad los porvenires que me quedaban: a) hablar con Álvaro y decirle que el primo hermano aquel de Beatriz (ese eufemismo explicativo me permitiría nombrarla) había elaborado un poema que parecía dilatar hasta lo infinito las posibilidades de la cacofonía y del caos. (Borges, "El Aleph" 134)

He remembers her in public. Nonetheless, there is a problem: how he names her. Although the community had a bond with Beatriz and cared —keeps caring— about her, the fictional Borges tries to remember her unacceptably: the narrator reaches to mourn as a lover, and his peers cannot accommodate such understanding of his relationship with Beatriz. Because of that, the social frame of mourning fails, even when it *is working*. The others walk with the fictional Borges through his loss; nevertheless, they do not carry him *through his actual loss*.

The ontologizing process gets compromised, and the pain in the narrator grows. This suffering encourages his obsession. The healing of the fictional Borges depends on naming Beatriz, talking about her, and sharing the experience of his loss with others. One may think he has a whole auditorium to exorcise his devils, starting with Carlos Argentino Daneri, Beatriz's cousin. However, every encounter with him finishes by deflecting any mention of Beatriz: "El treinta de abril de 1941 me permití agregar al alfajor una botella de coñac del país. Carlos Argentino lo probó, lo juzgó interesante y emprendió, al cabo de unas copas, una vindicación del hombre moderno" (Borges, "El Aleph" 127), he always prefer another topic for the

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conversation. Every visit that the fictional Borges pays to Beatriz's relatives—on her birthday to remember and honor her—turns into a *different* reunion. The character searches for the opportunity to be close to Beatriz's world and, perhaps, reactivate the social frame of mourning that would allow him to grieve in public, to ontologize his loss. Nevertheless, the others suspend the margin to perform the naming—and then the mourning—changing the mourner's spot of interest.

The only occasion in which other than the fictional Borges names his beloved one is when Carlos Argentino provokes the narrator to go to his basement and discover the Aleph: "—Claro está que si no lo ves, tu incapacidad no invalida mi testimonio… Baja; muy en breve podrás entablar un diálogo con todas las imágenes de Beatriz" (Borges, "El Aleph" 137). The fictional Borges's main objective is to meet again with Beatriz, and her cousin knows that. With this information, he sends the character to the basement with the promise of seeing her again. This reveals something: Carlos Argentino, like all the others—who met Beatriz and recognized, but did not accept, how meaningful she was to the fictional Borges—chooses to remain silent, to efface her when Borges is around. They negate the opportunity to mourn based on their prejudice to the fictional Borges's version of his bond with Beatriz: his love is unacceptable to them. The social frame of mourning cannot operate in these conditions, and this malfunction makes the character unable to accept the reality about his beloved since nobody discusses the past with him, and no one signifies the history with him. The breakdown gets even more complicated when he sees Beatriz in the Aleph:

> vi en un cajón del escritorio (y la letra me hizo temblar) cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas, que Beatriz había dirigido a Carlos Argentino, vi un adorado monumento en la Chacarita, vi la reliquia atroz de lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz Viterbo, vi la circulación de mi oscura sangre, vi el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte, vi el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en el Aleph la tierra, vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y

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sentí vértigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universe. (Borges, "El Aleph" 140–41)

The fictional Borges recognizes the truth about Beatriz and Carlos Argentino. He understands why his romantic relationship with Beatriz was doomed. When he returns from the basement, he does not share his experience of Beatriz with her cousin; instead, the protagonist chooses to avoid saying anything about the Aleph because he decides to remain silent to punish Carlos Argentino. This decision negates him a space to socialize his loss. It amalgamates with another: the one represented in the knowledge of the incestuous romance between his beloved one and his rival—the pompous writer who wants to create a universal poem.

Furthermore, his choice implies that he holds a new secret, a new piece of information that cannot be named nor ontologized. Beatriz's specter adds a new pain: the destabilization of her constant image in the fictional Borges's narrative. Thus, the protagonist reaches for oblivion to restore the balance: "Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido" (Borges, "El Aleph" 142). He says he forgot, even though he *narrates* the story after *realizing* his forgetting. That means he did not forget; instead, he gave himself the illusion of unconsciousness. The lack of mourning and the impossibility of a social frame that facilitates grieving cannot be eluded.

The specter keeps lurking: "Por increíble que parezca, yo creo que hay (o que hubo) otro Aleph, yo creo que el Aleph de la calle Garay era un falso Aleph" (Borges, "El Aleph" 143). Motivated by the concern that he does not want to accept the facts about Beatriz, the fictional Borges tries to play himself: he postulates the existence of other Alephs. Guessing the presence of more Alephs means that the one in the Viterbo's house was fake, opening the door to thinking that there is no unicity nor truth (Abadi 43). This has an impact on diegesis's system of truth. The supposed *falsification* of the images that the Aleph showed to the fictional Borges is just an entrance to a vast panorama. This leads him to keep the immutable and

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celebratory version of Beatriz since it is only another point of view, a different angle from which probably another Aleph could show her. The impossibility of mourning, the melancholia of the fictional Borges, lies in two things: on the one hand, the silence of his community about Beatriz in his presence; on the other hand, his inability to communicate, re-accommodate and give sense to the past since nobody wants to hear him talking about his beloved one. The group is unable to deal with and accept the value and meaning of the relationship Beatriz-Borges for the protagonist; consequently, the social frame of mourning breaks: the loss cannot be accommodated in the axis offered by the society nor comprehended in the terms that the community imposes to this affiliation.

A spectral closure: final considerations

Literature's dominions include the capacity to show how social environments work: on the one hand, according to the Bakhtinian tradition, every verbal composition is charged with ideology —that means that language and literature are produced ideologically and produce ideology—; on the other hand, mimetic devices (re)produce the rules of the empirical reality and negotiate with them in the literary discourse. Short stories, such as "El Aleph" and "Emma Zunz," exhibit the function of some aspect of reality that allows the text to rise. Hence, fiction could teach about how societies organize knowledge and the parameters with which they value interhuman interactions. Borges's fiction highlights the understanding of the work of mourning and its complement: melancholia.

In the first section of this article, I developed a posture that prefers characterizing the work of mourning as a collective activity that depends on social frames, which allows the mourner to express his pain and accept the world change that implies the definitive closure of a contingency —the past, present, and future bond established with the loss— in the frame of a more significant contingency— the social and empirical reality. This idea opposes the Freudian conceptualization

of the work of mourning because the Austrian version of psychoanalysis seizes it as the necessity to change the object of desire as part of an adjustment of the libidinal schema. In contrast, I prefer to argue that mourning implies annihilating something that cannot be replaced. Then, the process implies accepting that in the company of a community that allows the mourner to express his pain and *heal*. Furthermore, the impossibility of mourning does not imply a pathology—the Freudian narcissistic interiorization—just a lack of communication. When someone cannot mourn, the loss itself cannot be accommodated in the parameters of the social frame of mourning deployed by his peers.

The short stories treated in this essay show the work of mourning and melancholia. "Emma Zunz" and "El Aleph" recreate the work of mourning, and, in both cases, it *fails* because of melancholy. In "Emma Zunz," there is a prohibition to mentioning Emma's father, who died in exile. She does not have the opportunity to share her loss and signify and socialize her grief. This process, called the ontologizing of the loss by Jacques Derrida, starts the work of mourning since it opens the social frame that could allow the practical realization of mourning. However, Emma cannot refer to his father because the others remember him as a thief and a traitor, negating his care and putting Emmanuel aside humanity. The silence imperative—not expressed aloud, but it rules the fiction—leads Emma to establish a secondary narrative. The apparent misread corresponds to a way to deal with the loss when nobody accompanies the mourner: she even locates her logic in the divine to mourn. The expression of her bereavement turns into revenge, a vengeance that —in synecdoche— may heal the accumulated losses. However, the doubt about the effectiveness of this mechanism is still there: since Emma performed in her logic and according to a narration whose axis only she knows, the mourning moves by contiguity. Perhaps, metonymy—the obscured expression of something that cannot be said —allows Emma to finish her mourning; perhaps, do not.

In "The Aleph," things are different. The fictional Borges can talk about her beloved Beatriz. He built a monument around her. That gives a clue about the

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performance of mourning in this short story: only the fictional Borges understands the bond between him and Beatriz as a relationship between lovers. In the diegesis, nobody talks about Beatriz in the presence of the fictional Borges: their social schema does not allow the value of the relationship in the terms expected by the character, then the diegesis negates him the chance to mourn. The image of Beatriz turns into a specter: she is always there even though she cannot be there. The fictional Borges searches for her and constantly tries to name her, but the system keeps pulling him back; thus, the social frame of mourning cannot emerge. Melancholia rises because nobody helps him with his pain. He sees the truth about Beatriz; he wants to forget it. Furthermore, he chooses to reject the fidelity of the Aleph to keep Beatriz's image unchallenged. The fictional Borges reinforces his society's *prohibition* of grieving by maintaining an absolute concept of his beloved one: the picture does not change even though the world has changed. Emma and Borges cannot mourn —then, they fall into melancholy— since they are alone: no one *accompanies* them; nobody *helps* them to *(re)signify* their reality after loss. They only have the company of God and the Aleph, of the absolute.

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