

# The Holocaust as Ideology: Borges and the Meaning of Transnational Fascism

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Can the written word represent trauma? Representations of trauma refer to the extremes of human experience, at the boundary between life and death. In fact, a number of works of Holocaust literature succeed in going beyond a mere symptomatic portrayal of the traumatic experience to critically interpret the experiences of the genocide. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges offers a case study of how one author sought to grapple with the problems of representing this horror. Borges, an anti-fascist Argentine writer, did not observe the Holocaust first-hand, but he bore witness to it from distant Buenos Aires where a local fascist movement was ascendant. Significantly, his peripheral position prompted Borges to consider the global dimensions of the fascist politics of the self and its effects on victims and perpetrators.

Borges's portrayals are uncannily effective in terms of what María Pía Lara has called the disclosive potential of certain narratives. Such texts generate reflective judgments. Furthermore, through their capacity to thematize evil and, more specifically, to imaginatively convey through language the extreme nature of genocidal atrocities, they enhance our comprehension of history.<sup>2</sup> Although he never saw a Nazi extermination camp, Borges displayed a firm grasp of the ideological ramifications of the annihilation of European Jewry.

I here examine Borges's depictions of Holocaust trauma. Placing these writings in their national and global contexts offers an understanding of the Holocaust's global dimensions. Scholars of the Holocaust might well be surprised by this focus on Borges, just as scholars of Borges might be surprised when I analyze his works in

1 I would like to thank Ben Brower, Roger Chartier, Luis Herran, Dominick LaCapra, María Pía Lara, José Sazbón, José Emilio Burucua and Enzo Traverso for their comments on previous versions of this essay. It was presented at the conference 'Repetition with Change: The Intellectual Legacies of Dominick LaCapra,' held at Cornell University on September 25-26, 2009.

2 María Pía Lara, *Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

the analytical frame of Holocaust historiography and studies of transnational fascism. But, in fact, Borges was one of the first writers to view the Holocaust as part of global history. In making this claim, I do not mean that Europe, or the Holocaust, needs to be “provincialized” or that European events can only be explained in terms of post-colonial realities or vice versa. But I do maintain that certain postcolonial studies have shown that the local and the global are mutually inclusive. In the case of modern genocide, for example, Nazi concentration and extermination camps are part of the genealogy of the modern age’s “carceral archipelagos” of victimization.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, witnessing and interpreting the connections between ideology and trauma blurs conventional geopolitical distinctions between European and Latin American history, as well as other histories. To put it another way, we may well see the center more clearly from the margins.<sup>4</sup>

### **Fascism, Violence and Meaning**

This essay proposes to delineate the national and transnational paths that led Borges, who lived and wrote during the Holocaust, to ponder the conceptual and practical relations between the victims of trauma and its perpetrators. In other words, I propose that Borges’s oeuvre can be approached so as to consider the Holocaust’s most radical ideological dimensions. In particular, I emphasize those dimensions of the processes of victimization driven by the fundamental concepts of fascist politics. More specifically, I stress the need to consider these processes as part of a broader spectrum of traumatic encounters. In these encounters, the sacrifice of the body – either in the form of self-sacrifice or as a direct sacrificial action towards the Other – obeys the mandates of a radical ideology.

- 3 I am making reference to a suggestive argument by Ann Laura Stoler, *Carceral Archipelagos of Empire: Retracing the Imperial Modern*, presented at the conference ‘On Camps: History, Violence and Trauma,’ at the History Department of the New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College, New York, October 14, 2010. For an excellent genealogical analysis of the Holocaust and colonialism, see Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: New Press, 2003). See also A. Dirk Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History,” in A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 5.
- 4 See Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2.

Borges in fact stresses the ultimate impossibility of representation, and this paradoxically allows the analysis of ideology. The limits of representation are symptoms of the ideological motivation behind them. It is precisely by approaching the limits of the representation of trauma that Borges was able to arrive at a critical interpretative perspective on fascism. “Nazism suffers from irreality,” Borges emphasized, intending perhaps the fascist incapacity to distinguish imaginary from lived experience. The imaginary gets confused with reality, and what is subjective is objectified through Nazi ideology. According to Hannah Arendt, fascist ideology offers a circular vision of the world. It rejects sense perception and empirical evidence. By uncritically reiterating its own assumptions, it transforms them into reality for its victims.

For Arendt, fascist ideology is a radical example of the ideological event. Fascism presents its ideology as truth, as an accurate reflection of reality.<sup>5</sup> Reality, in turn, is changed to resemble ideological mandates. Like Arendt during World War II, Borges viewed the absolutist ideology of Nazism as a form of violence subjected to death. In a political “annotation” of 1944, Borges argued that, since Nazism was tantamount to hell, it could not offer a place to live: “it is uninhabitable, men can only die for Nazism, they can lie, kill and be covered in blood for it.”<sup>6</sup> For him, Nazism represents what psychoanalysis calls the death drive. Replete with impossibility, it promises redemption through destruction.

Borges wonders at the enthusiasm displayed by Argentina’s fascists even as they sensed that Nazism’s defeat was imminent. He explains this fascist mental state as a form of suspension of disbelief. In literature, the suspension of the reader’s disbelief allows the story to proceed; in fascism, the suspension of disbelief becomes a wellspring of politics – it replaces the real world with ideology. “The enigmatic and notorious enthusiasm of many followers of Hitler” is explained by the fact that “they have lost all notion that incoherence needs to be justified.”<sup>7</sup> In short, Borges

5 Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government”, *The Review of Politics*, 15:3 (1953), pp. 303-27; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian, 1959), pp. 158-84; Arendt, “The Seeds of a Fascist International,” in Jerome Kohn (ed.), *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 147.

6 “Anotación al 23 de Agosto de 1944,” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras Completas II*, (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996), p. 105. When an English translation of Borges is not cited, the translations from the Spanish are my own.

7 *Ibid.*

rejects, as he had already done as early as 1940, the possibility of rational dialogue with fascism.<sup>8</sup> However, unlike the typical anti-fascist dismissal of fascism as nonsensical and thus lacking any real content that can be interpreted, Borges insists on a political imperative to analyze the primary meaning of its ideology and practice. He rhetorically asks: “has not Freud reasoned, and Walt Whitman intuited, that men do not have sufficient information about the deep motivations behind their behavior?”<sup>9</sup>

Borges maintained that fascist behavior both in Europe and Argentina had to be explained, or as he put it “reasoned,” by focusing on this “deepness.” With reference to Freud, he linked the unconscious with the return of the historically repressed, that is, with formations repressed at a primitive stage of the development of civilization, at a pre-cultural stage. He thus argued in 1944 that fascism was “playing the game of energetic barbarism.”<sup>10</sup>

Borges does not, of course, deny that barbarians can think, and even participate in intellectual traditions (he even makes references to barbarian reactions to Western

8 In his “Definition of the Germanophile” of 1940, Borges summarized a “conversación que he tenido con muchos germanófilos, y en la que juro no volver a incurrir, porque el tiempo otorgado a los mortales no es infinito y el fruto de esas conferencias es vano.” Borges, “Definición del Germanófilo,” in *Obras Completas* IV, p. 442. In 1945, Borges identified Communism, Nazism, surrealism and even psychoanalysis as symptoms of an era which was “bajamente romántica” and “melancólica”. See Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 65. Sergio Pastormerlo notes that in this passage Borges emphasizes the political dimension of the romantic phenomenon that he understood as a collection of different forms of hatred. See Sergio Pastormerlo, *Borges Crítico* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007), pp. 112-3. It is important to note that in that instance, the Borgean collection of hated objects (namely, Nazism, Communism, Surrealism and psychoanalysis) eliminated nuances and reproduced the perceived dimension of the criticized phenomena as Borges frequently expressed it in his private conversations with Bioy Casares. In these talks, Borges was often ambivalent about psychoanalysis and, for example in 1958, he identified “the Freudian” with denial and the unconscious, that is, with the possibility of making an interpretation of what is implicit (p. 423). One year later he complains to Bioy: “Ya Freud es considerado como la verdad” (p. 602). See Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Borges* (Buenos Aires: Destino, 2006).

9 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 106.

10 Ibid.

traditions, from the Jesuitical tradition to Nietzsche), but for Borges this fascist capacity for thinking becomes a form of “monstrous reasoning” (“razonamiento monstruoso”).<sup>11</sup>

Borges understands the logic of Nazism as a deification of the “atrocious.” It is an absolute rejection of normative Western ethics, in that “the end justifies the means.” Borges even suggests that, for Nazism, means tend to become ends. In short, violence constitutes fascist political meaning. In a text composed in 1940, he argues that Argentine fascists admire Hitler, “not despite lightening bombs and fulminous invasions, machine guns, denunciations and perjuries, but precisely because of those uses and instruments.” Thus, for Borges, Nazi fascism constituted a “prodigy.” “It has a moral nature, and it is almost incredible.”<sup>12</sup>

11 Borges, “Definición del Germanófilo,” in *Obras Completas IV*, p. 442; Borges, “Ensayo de imparcialidad,” *Sur* 61 (Oct. 1939), p. 27.

12 Borges, “Es de naturaleza moral, y es casi increíble”; “Definición del Germanófilo” (1940), *Obras Completas IV*, p. 442. See also p. 338. On the origins of the discussion on means and ends see p. 341. For an excellent discussion of the place of ethics in the Borgesian interpretation of Nazism, see Annick Louis, *Borges ante el fascismo* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 284. In a previous text, Louis argues that “Borges’s militancy against fascism is pathetic” (“la militancia de Borges contra el nazismo resulta patética”); see her article “Borges y el nazismo,” *Variaciones Borges* 4 (1997), pp. 117-36. Louis presents Borges as willing to transform reality into fictional material. She also thinks that Borges often had a “precarious” conception of Nazism. Without denying this Borgesian displacement from reality to fiction – a displacement that mirrors the efforts of some of the characters in his wartime stories, as we will see is the case with Jaromir Hladik or even David Jerusalem – my intention in this essay is to argue the opposite view. In other words, I here highlight how the historical and interpretative dimension of the Borgesian wartime storytelling, as well as his non-fictional political writing, offer a critical theory of fascism. I have previously addressed some of these issues in a preliminary manner in Federico Finchelstein, “Borges, la Shoah y el ‘Mensaje kafkiano’: Un ensayo de interpretación,” *Espacios de Crítica y Producción. Publicación de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras-Universidad de Buenos Aires* 25 (1999), pp. 75-80. Other works on Borges also explore this relation between Borges and Nazism, among them see especially those of Aizenberg, Senkman and Stavans: Edna Aizenberg, *Borges, el tejedor del Aleph y otros ensayos* (Frankfurt: Vervuert: 1997); Leonardo Senkman, “Borges y el mal del nazismo,” in Myrna Solotorevsky & Ruth Fine (eds.), *Borges en Jerusalén* (Frankfurt: Vervuert: 2003); Ilan Stavans, “A Comment on Borges’s Response to Hitler,” *Modern Judaism* 23:1 (2003), pp. 1-11; Leonardo Senkman & Saul Sosnowski, *Fascismo y nazismo en las letras argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2009), pp. 87-9.

This fascist conjunction between a “monstrous” logic of interpretation and a new normativity which is, paradoxically, based upon the constant search for anomic violence, leads to the death, the “beheading,” of reason. This sacrificial act epitomizes the fascist search for authenticity. It embodies a poetics of “impulsiveness” and lack of logic. Borges simplifies this fascist rejection of reason by conflating it with Nietzschean motifs. But, at the same time, he emphasizes the complex process through which the dissolution of normativity signals the transcendental absoluteness of the Nazi revolution.<sup>13</sup> As he argued in 1939 in an anti-fascist essay, “Adolf Hitler does things à-la Zarathustra, beyond good and evil.”<sup>14</sup>

In this context, violence becomes the starting point of politics, its source of power and its origins. In this framework, the victim – in the case of the Holocaust, the Jewish Other – is transformed, like reason itself, into a sacrificial object. This Borgean insight presents conceptual convergences with several more recent theorists, from Jacques Lacan to Giorgio Agamben.

In Lacan’s work, for example, the idea of Jewish sacrifice at the hands of the Nazis was an essential part of Nazism’s theory and in practice. The Jew represented a “god in the dark.”<sup>15</sup> For Agamben, the Holocaust’s logic of sacrifice is carnival-like, a sort of upending of subject positions that transforms the sacrificial object into a subject of ontological knowledge.<sup>16</sup> I disagree. This sort of analytical narrative provides full meaning to an experience that victims were not able to understand in their own context. In fact, they could not understand it insofar as their “sacrifice” only made sense to fascists. Only fascists can explain to themselves the meaning of victimization. For non-fascists in general, and the victims in particular, the Holocaust makes no

13 “Definición del Germanófilo” (1940), Borges, *Obras Completas* IV, p. 442, and see also p. 427.

14 “Adolf Hitler obra a lo Zarathustra, más allá del bien y del mal.” Jorge Luis Borges, “Ensayo de imparcialidad,” *Sur* 61 (Oct. 1939), p. 27.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 275.

16 In Agamben’s view, traumatic experience seems to illuminate the analytic sense of things. In short, he endows the sacrificed victim with authentic knowledge about the world. The language of authenticity works as a legitimizing device for victims, and for Agamben as their interpreter. They comprehend the world in ways that escape non-victims. See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999). For cogent criticisms of Agamben in this regard, see Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), chapter 4, and María Pía Lara, *Narrating Evil*.

sense. Thus, in terms of historical experience, the limits of representation mark the most difficult, if not impossible, moments of working through trauma. Interpreters who did not experience the traumatic event, confront, consciously or unconsciously, a conceptualization frontier.<sup>17</sup>

This was the case of Borges. For him, the Holocaust embodied its own lack of substantiation. It was a meaningless event from the perspective of reason. However, it was also the objective outcome of meaningful mythical formations rooted in unreason. For Borges, this rejection of reason is related to the most primal elements of fascist ideology: rational argument is replaced by images, emotions, and desires. In other words, fascism embraces imaginary politics and produces radical events that are beyond the limits of rational representation and justification.

### Process and Message

Certain representations of the victims, perpetrators, and observers could help to move these limits outward so that we can conceptualize what was previously beyond the frontier of critical theory. They present the historian with new possibilities of critically-oriented analytic action aimed at thinking the particular language in which Auschwitz seems to express itself. In a metaphorical sense, this is also true for certain canonical texts that preceded Auschwitz. For Borges, these included the works of Franz Kafka and Argentina's most famous writer at the time, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. As Saul Friedlander reminds us, in Kafka one finds an especially insightful presentation of the inability of individuals who stand at the margins of society to find meaning in their own dehumanization. More contextually, for Borges and some of his contemporaries in Argentina and elsewhere, the work of Kafka provided metaphors for conceptualizing the Holocaust at the time it was taking place and as it was comprehended. Famously, in *The Trial*, a victim is killed and dies with his throat sliced "like a dog".<sup>18</sup> When

17 Berel Lang, "The Representation of Limits," in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 300-17. See also Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), and more recently, *Philosophical Witnessing: The Holocaust as Presence* (Waltham, Mass: University Press of New England, 2009).

18 Saul Friedlander, "Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 1 (1976), pp. 36-59. See also Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), and *The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper, 2007). For a critical

he reflected on *The Trial* in 1937, Borges probably took notice of this execution, in as much as it echoed specific practices important in the Argentine context. *Degüello* (execution by cutting of the throat) was the method of killing infamously used by the followers of the nineteenth-century Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. Borges established comparisons between *degüello* and Hitler.<sup>19</sup> Although by the beginning of the 1930s, Argentine fascists had embraced Rosas, the violence of his rule had long been denounced as “barbaric,” and for Argentine liberals he was the archetype of the bad ruler. Here the work of liberal writer and politician Domingo Faustino Sarmiento is especially important.<sup>20</sup> Sarmiento served as president of Argentina from 1868 to 1874, and he left a lasting imprint on the country thanks to policies such as his education reform, which emphasized a public secular curriculum. He was also a prolific writer who did much to conceptualize and popularize liberalism in Latin America. He established clear distinctions between liberalism and other political movements, such as the authoritarianism and political violence that typified episodes like the Rosas regime. Borges and Sarmiento both viewed Argentinean politics through the lens of Western political philosophy. This is what led Borges to discern in global fascism elements of Argentine and Latin American notions of the modern.

analysis of Friedlander’s interpretation of the victims’ perspective see Amos Goldberg, “The Victim’s Voice and Melodramatic Aesthetics in History,” *History and Theory* 48:3 (October 2009), pp. 220-37.

- 19 See Borges, *Obras Completas* IV, pp. 306, 326; II, p. 31. The *degüello* metaphor is highly meaningful for Borges. He places this practice within the trope of generic barbarism. Almost without establishing contextual differences, Borges conflates victims and times on both sides of the Atlantic. Years later, he would link the fate of the victims of the nineteenth-century Argentine barbarism denounced by Sarmiento to the victimization of Anne Frank. To a great extent, Borges conflated fascism in general with Argentine fascism and its vindicated genealogy (Rosas). Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 206; “Pedro Salvadores,” in Borges, *Obras Completas* II, pp. 372-3.
- 20 See Jorge Luis Borges, Prologue to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Recuerdos de provincia* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1944). On the topic of civilization and barbarism in Borges see Daniel Balderston, *¿Fuera de contexto? Referencialidad histórica y expresión de la realidad en Borges* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1996), pp. 131-57. On this topic see also Doris Sommer, *Foundational National Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).



But unlike Sarmiento, Borges sought to analyze the intellectual logic of unreason. In other words, he was interested in the process according to which fascism became part of a bureaucratic logic that had not existed at the times of Rosas and Sarmiento. In this sense, Kafka acted for him as a more nuanced complement to Sarmiento, the foundational (in Doris Sommer's sense) narrator of Argentine (and Latin American) literature.<sup>21</sup> For Sarmiento, Latin American politics was a contest between civilization and barbarism. With this frame of reference, Borges found it essential, as an Argentine writer, to evaluate fascism.

Borges postulated the possibility that there are reasons for the victim's stigmatization, but that these reasons are not evident from the perspective of the victims. In Borges's view, Kafka opened paths that allow us to understand and to pursue our own problems in conceptualizing the otherness of victimization. The relation between torment and the uncanny represents an obsessive search to find the meaning behind the context. As Beatriz Sarlo cogently notes, Borges saw in Kafkian bureaucratic depictions a process whereby the oxymoron becomes the matrix of a manifestly totalitarian social structure. This allusion is slightly masked in 'The Lottery in Babylon,' the Borges story published in the Argentine magazine *Sur* in 1941:

In many cases the knowledge that certain happiness were the simple product of chance would have diminished their virtue. To avoid that obstacle, the *agents of the Company* made use of the power of suggestion and magic. Their steps, their maneuverings, were secret. To find out about the intimate hopes and terrors of each individual, they had astrologists and spies. There were certain stone lions, there was a sacred latrine called *Qaphqa*.<sup>22</sup>

21 Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*.

22 Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1998), p. 173. On Borges and Kafka see also Juan De Castro, *The Spaces of Latin American Literature: Tradition, Globalization and Cultural Production* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 55-7. See Borges, *Obras Completas I*, p. 458; in English, see Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 33. On the historiographical tendency to emphasize the role of Nazi bureaucracy in the Holocaust while at the same time downplaying the role of ideology, see Federico Finchelstein, "The Holocaust Canon: Rereading Raul Hilberg," *New German Critique* 96 (Fall 2005), 3-48. On Borges and his emphasis on fascism and technology see "Wells previsor," *Sur* 26 (November 1936), p. 126. Borges argues:

Here “the Company” fills the empty spaces of meaning with an ideology that produces something new, magical and suggestive. But this gift presents a dimension of meaning located beyond reason. It is a gift of death. This is, in short, the oxymoronic moment of fascist totalitarianism. The reference to Kafka as a sacred latrine emphasizes this contradiction.<sup>23</sup> The world is turned upside down, which for the elitist Borges marked the populist opening for unmediated violence which also stands for the uncannily sinister. I would argue that it is this relation between the unconscious and the violence involved in the traumatic that makes explicit the Borgean reading of fascism and the Shoah. It is a trauma that can be the subject of a reasoned explanation. And at the same time the unreason of Nazism cannot be explained though reason but through its appeal to instinctual forces of barbarism. As Borges pointed out in 1944, the thinking “ego” would never be able to accept the triumph of fascism.<sup>24</sup>

### Reason, Repression, and Sacrifice

In 1939, in an antifascist piece entitled “Essay on Impartiality,” Borges presented the ideological triumph of Nazism as an outcome of an incapacity to think. Rhetorical imagery replaced analytic reflexivity. He argued that this situation affected both fascists and antifascists. That the fascist victory in war was a reflection of the fascist refusal of reason was predictable. That it equally reflected anti-fascism’s approach to reason was unexpected, and for Borges, unacceptable: “Exclamations have usurped the function of reasoned thoughts; it is true that the foolish people who absentmindedly emit those interjections give them a discursive air, and that this tenuous syntactic simulacrum satisfies and persuades those who listen to them. The same person who swears that the war is a sort of liberal *jihad* against dictatorships soon thereafter wants Mussolini to fight Hitler: this action would annihilate his hypothesis.”<sup>25</sup>

For Borges, there was almost no distinction between fascism and Nazism. Both embodied the “sacred” fascist attack against secular reason. Furthermore, both were essentially based on nationalism. Borges viewed nationalism as being opposed to secular liberalism. In contrast, what he called the “liberal *jihad*” replaced secular

“la ocupación tiránica de Abisinia fue obra de los aviadores y de los *chauffeurs* -y del temor, tal vez un poco mitológico, de los perversos laboratorios de Hitler.”

23 See Jorge Luis Borges, “Nathaniel Hawthorne” (1949), in Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 55; “Franz Kafka,” in Borges, *Obras Completas* IV, p. 454.

24 Jorge Luis Borges, “Anotación al 23 de Agosto de 1944,” in Borges, *Obras Completas* II, pp. 105-6.

25 Jorge Luis Borges, “Ensayo de imparcialidad,” *Sur* 61 (October 1939), p. 27.

reason with a pseudo-religious take on liberalism. It claimed nationalism to be an essential attribute of democracy. It thus presented nationalism as essentially opposed to fascism. Borges criticized this sort of anti-fascist nationalism, with its tendency to stress national exceptionalism over secular cosmopolitanism. In reference to a book by H.G Wells, Borges commented: "Incredibly, Wells is not a Nazi. This is incredible because almost all his contemporaries are Nazis even when they deny it or ignore it. From 1925 onwards, there has been no publicist who has not been of the opinion that the inevitable and trivial fact of having been born in a given country or belonging to a given race (or a given good mixture of races) is not a singular privilege or a sufficient talisman."<sup>26</sup> The magic motif, both a symbol of the sacred but also a trademark of the more profane Kafkian totalitarian "Company" was, according to Borges, an attribute of a global fascism that transcended its followers and also became the language of its foes. Thus, Borges argued in a book review published in 1941 in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, even those "who vindicate democracy, those who believe themselves to be very different from Goebbels, use the same idiom as their enemy and urge their readers to listen to the beat of a heart attuned to the intimate commands of blood and soil."<sup>27</sup>

Borges critiqued the emphasis of both liberals and fascists on the political unconscious. He questioned their stress on the inner sources of the self and their appeal to national feelings rooted in primal drives. This is the displacement of reason by a biological/corporeal imperative. Borges' concern with the loss of reason, that is, the analytical void that Nazism instigated even among those who opposed it, signaled a continuum between his anti-fascist essays and his more fictional works during the 1930s and 1940s.

As Beatriz Sarlo notes, in stories such as *La muerte y la brújula* (published in *Sur* in 1942), Borges understood Nazi racism as an "ideology that despises reason."<sup>28</sup> Nazism's rejection of reason gave meaning to the Borgean liberal critique. For Borges, reason was the definitive answer to fascism. In this light, it would be useful to return to a Borgean insight on the genealogy of fascism.

In 1941, reviewing what he called an "accurate" essay by Bertrand Russell, Borges proposed that intellectual history was the best tool for understanding contemporary

26 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, pp. 101-2.

27 Ibid. It is interesting to note that Borges presents the year 1925, that is, the year fascism becomes clearly dictatorial, as the moment when extreme nationalism becomes a global opinion.

28 Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, Un escritor en las orillas* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1998), p. 191.

politics. The theory of fascism (“a doctrine”) gave meaning and shapes to its praxis (its application). He argued that “the true intellectual flees from contemporary debates: reality is always anachronistic.”<sup>29</sup> For Borges, in order to understand fascism, one needed to start with its intellectual genealogy. The ideology’s past explained fascist behavior in the present. In this way, the beginning of the irrational theory of politics presupposed its practice. In other words, in attempting to explain fascism, it is more important to examine Nazi intellectuals who are active interpreters of this genealogical ideology than it is to examine Hitler. The motives, the ideological readings of these intellectuals, explain Hitler. They made him possible. This active reduction of fascist practice to a mere derivation of ideological meaning is central to Borges. It eventually leads him to equate fascism with barbarism. For Borges, and Russell, the loss of rationality and the emphasis on the inner sources of the self made it easy to simply label Nazism as barbarism and juxtapose it with a sanitized, almost mythical, notion of the enlightenment.<sup>30</sup>

This Borgean search for the anti-enlightenment reached its full potentiality in *Deutsches Requiem*. Published in 1946, this story presents a Nazi narrator, Otto Dietrich Zur Linde, who reflects on the Holocaust and fascism. Facing justice, the imaginary Nazi Zur Linde argues: “I will be executed as torturer and murderer. The tribunal acted justly; from the start I declared myself guilty. Tomorrow, when the prison clock strikes nine, I will have entered into death’s realm.”<sup>31</sup>

Zur Linde is a German intellectual who declares his admiration for Nietzsche and Spengler.<sup>32</sup> He grapples with the latter in his essay “Abrechnung mit Spengler.” Nonetheless, he unambiguously admires Spengler’s military “radical German spirit.” The mention of Spengler is not fortuitous. In the sentence that directly follows Zur Linde’s “settling with Spengler,” he states: “In 1929 I entered the Party.” This apparent non-sequitur makes sense in terms of the formalistic logic of Nazi ideology.

29 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 103.

30 Borges commented that Russell argued that “in a sense” there was a dichotomy between the rationality of the early 18th century and the irrationality of “our time.” Borges adds: “I would eliminate the timid adverb that starts the sentence.” (“Yo eliminaría el tímido adverbio que encabeza la frase.”) Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 104.

31 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 576; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 141.

32 Years later, in 1969, Borges would add that Zur Linde represents a platonic idea of the Nazi. See Luz Rodríguez Carranza, “Réquiem para un fin de siglo,” *Anthropos* 142-43 (1993), p. 89.

In this sense, Borges is interested in tracing the direct intellectual links between the philosophical rejection of the enlightenment and its praxis in fascism. Zur Linde's conversion to fascism does not come easily: "I do not lack courage, I am *repelled by violence*. I understood, however, that we were on the verge of a new era, and that this era, comparable to the initial epochs of Islam and Christianity, demanded a new kind of man. Individually my comrades were disgusting to me; in vain did I try to reason that we had to suppress our individuality for the lofty purpose which brought us together."<sup>33</sup>

Zur Linde links the vanity of reasoning about the inhumanity of the self with the need to eliminate the Jewish Other. This ideological meaning of a new epoch – an epoch that in a sense was not to be lived by its perpetrators – was included in the Kafkaian message. Celan expressed it in his poem about the "Meister aus Deutschland" who, for Celan, was not a representation of death personified as a Nazi. Nazis were rather the political embodiment of unreason. Zur Linde can be equally seen as the Borgean interpretation of the Nazi attempt to turn death itself into an ideological artifact. In 1941 Zur Linde is named deputy commander of Tarnowitz, a concentration camp. He tells us that he felt no gratification occupying this position. Zur Linde adopts a Nietzschean notion of mercy. "Essentially," he says, "*Nazism* is an act of *morality*, a purging of corrupted humanity, to dress it anew. This transformation is common in battle, amidst the clamor of the captains and the shouting; such is not the case in a wretched cell." This monstrous morality that fascism engenders is tested against the last sin of Zarathustra. Zur Linde states: "I almost committed it (I confess) when they sent us the eminent poet *David Jerusalem* from Breslau."<sup>34</sup>

Note that in Borges's narrative the quasi-sacrificial aspects of Nazi ideology and practice are depicted as the return of the German people to barbarism. For Borges, Nazi barbarism centered on a collective offering to the Führer.

In a significant essay written in 1938, Borges argued that in following Hitler, the Germans were "willing to sacrifice their culture, their past, their probity."<sup>35</sup> The poet

33 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 577; Borges, *Labyrinths*, pp. 142-3.

34 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 578.

35 Jorge Luis Borges, "Letras Alemanas: Una exposición afligente," *Sur* 8:49 (1938), p. 67. See also Borges, "Definición del Germanófilo" (1940), in *Obras Completas* IV, p. 441. In this regard, Borges remains within the sphere of Argentine anti-fascism in particular, and of global anti-fascist culture in general. See the introduction and second chapter in Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press,

Jerusalem represents this past and this culture. It is this part of Zur Linde's persona, his *Bildung* – his traditional German education – that he seeks to sacrifice.<sup>36</sup>

Dominick LaCapra analyzes this essential aspect of the Nazi (and fascist) processes of victimization. He argues that sacrifice maintains an extra-moral ambivalence situated “beyond good and evil”: “Indeed, it compounds *ambivalence* insofar as it identifies the victim with a *gift* to a divinity or divine-like being (a status *Hitler* held for his committed followers). Moreover, in Nazi ideology and practice certain victims were abusively debased or abjected such that the ambivalent reaction toward them, which in other contexts might even involve identification with the victim, might be resolved in a predominantly, if not exclusively, negative direction with attraction or identification being foreclosed or *repressed*.”<sup>37</sup>

Zur Linde's feelings towards David Jerusalem are deeply ambivalent in the sense signaled by LaCapra. The poet's fame foreshadowed the possibility that he would have to die on the altar of fascist ideology. His death confirms what the ideology says about him. Jerusalem represents the Other. For Zur Linde, he signifies reason; therefore, he must be expunged.

Zur Linde emphasizes that the agonizing “loss” of Jerusalem is accompanied by the agonizing loss of his own self. “I *agonized* with him, I died with him, and somehow I was lost with him.”<sup>38</sup> The lost ego becomes a permanent absence, a self bereft of subjectivity.

2010). On antifascism, see Andrés Bisso, *Acción Argentina: Un antifascismo nacional en tiempos de guerra mundial* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2005) and *El antifascismo argentino* (Buenos Aires: CeDInCI Editores, 2007). On Borges and the literary milieu of Argentine anti-fascism see John King, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture, 1931-1970*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Rosalie Sitman, “Protest from Afar: The Jewish and Republican Presence in Victoria Ocampo's Revista SUR in the 1930s and 1940s,” in Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein (eds.), *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

36 On the different concepts of *Bildung* for victims and perpetrators see George Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

37 Dominick LaCapra, Preface to Federico Finchelstein (ed.), *Los Alemanes, el Holocausto y la Culpa Colectiva. El Debate Goldhagen* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1999), p. 24; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 133.

38 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 579; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 145.

In fascism, violence turns subjects into ideological objects. Repression then also disappears in order to make the victim disappear. Zur Linde feels compelled to describe how he tortured Jerusalem because it is central to his inner ideological battle as a Nazi. His own search conforms to Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the objectification of the subject in fascism.<sup>39</sup> In this context, fascism turns both the Other and the Self into objects, objects that can be neutralized and eliminated. The sacrifice of the Self renders it an object. Subjectivity is eliminated and gives way to rationalization – the need to mask desire with words and symbols.

“I was *severe with him*; I permitted neither my compassion nor his glory to make me relent. I had come to understand many years before that there is nothing on Earth that does not contain the seed of a possible Hell; a face, a word, a compass, a cigarette advertisement, are capable of driving a person mad if he is unable to forget them. Would not a man who continually imagined the *map of Hungary* be mad? I decided to apply this principle to the disciplinary regimen of our camp, and .... ‘By the end of 1942, Jerusalem *had lost his reason*; on March first, 1943, he managed to kill himself.’”<sup>40</sup> Before the loss of life, reason is lost. However, there is a limit to our own capacity to understand unreason. Borges feels that it is necessary to omit the most radical violence from his narrative. It is only through ellipsis that we can approach this violence: “I decided to apply this principle to the disciplinary regimen of our camp, and....” Here the fictional editor of Zur Linde's account adds a footnote which states: “It has been necessary to omit a few lines here” (“*Ha sido inevitable aquí omitir unas líneas*”). This “inevitability” is marked by editorial omniscience. Obviously Zur Linde himself had no compunctions about describing his acts of extreme violence. But the fictional editor/publisher of Zur Linde's report, a person who was not there, has reservations. The violence of perpetrators is unbearable to bystanders. Reified violence is not acceptable to those for whom the victims remain subjects. Borges, in a way, attempted to enable the subject to return to the narrative of the catastrophe. Borges suggested in his work that it is only through the subjective experience of victims, and not that of perpetrators or bystanders, that we can accurately approach their suffering. Suffering and the experience of torture is a central element of the story. It is by recovering these experiences that Borges reconstituted the subject lost in Auschwitz. Borges focused on the particular journey of victims, from their moment of shock and denial to their

39 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

40 Borges, *Obras Completas I*, p. 579; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 145.

attempts at self-awareness and distancing from the trauma that fascist ideology engenders. In short, he explored the historical connections between identification, distancing, and death.

### The Identity of the Victims

Another Jew from Breslau, the sociologist Norbert Elias, has addressed the particularity of the Jewish context at the time of Nazism. His special concern is the lack of recognition by Jews of fascism's implications for them. In Borges, this issue finds expression in "The Secret Miracle" ("El milagro secreto"), a short story written by Borges in 1942 and published in *Sur* in 1943, at the height of the Holocaust. In this story the protagonist, Jaromir Hladík, is not a Nazi but a Jewish victim. As in "Deutsches Réquiem," the main character is also on the brink of execution. But unlike the Nazi Zur Linde, and like David Jerusalem, the character is a Jewish intellectual.

The rationale behind the torture and death of Hladík presents us with a suggestive metaphor of instrumental rationality, the progressive differentiation between rational means and ends. It works, in short, as an inquiry into the objectification of the subject promoted by the fascist processes of victimization. Soon after the forces of the Third Reich enter Prague, Jaromir Hladík is denounced and detained. "He was taken to an aseptic, white barracks on the opposite bank of the Moldau. He was unable to refute a single one of the Gestapo's charges; his mother's family name was Jaroslavski, he was of Jewish blood, his study on Jakob Böhme had a marked Jewish emphasis, his signature had been one more on the protest against the *Anschluss*." In addition, we learn that, in 1928, Hladík had translated the Jewish mystical work *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) for a German publisher. Ironically, as in the case of Jerusalem, intellectual achievements are lethal under Nazism.

"The fulsome catalogue of the firm had exaggerated, for publicity purposes, the translator's reputation, and the catalogue had been examined by Julius Rothe, one of the officials who held Hladík's fate in his hands. There is not a person, who except in the field of his own specialization, is not credulous; two or three adjectives in Gothic type were enough to persuade Julius Rothe of Hladík's importance, and he ordered him sentenced to death *pour encourager les autres*."<sup>41</sup>

In his late story "Guayaquil" (1970), Borges revisited the motif of the objectification of a victim who embraces manifold identities. In this text, a seemingly arcane discussion about the origins of Argentine history presents an excuse for two

41 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 508; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 89.



historians to debate the hermeneutics of the will.<sup>42</sup> Here Borges seems to return to the topic of Nazi victimization, antisemitism, and the intellectual genealogy of fascism. One of the two historians is an exiled Jewish intellectual, Eduardo Zimmermann. His interlocutor is a patrician Argentine historian who in turn describes Zimmermann as a “foreign historiographer, expelled from his country by the Third Reich and now ... an Argentine citizen.”

There are interesting parallels between Zimmermann and Hladík. Both the historian and the kabbalist from Prague are specialists in deciphering symbols. The two of them face fascist denunciation, but unlike Hladík, Zimmermann could read fascism from the illuminating perspective of diasporic exile in Latin America.<sup>43</sup> In the story, Zimmermann, the naturalized Argentine Jewish citizen, identifies his Argentine-born, aristocratic and antisemitic interlocutor with blood, with the experience of emotions. He contrasts these features with his own Jewish experience as an analytic reader of texts. This experience is determined by the universal features of Judaism as well as by the particularities of his subject position as an exile. He ironically tells the patrician Argentine historian: “You are the authentic historian. Your people wandered the fields of America and fought the great battles while my own dark people were just emerging from the ghetto. You carry history in your blood.”<sup>44</sup> Zimmermann identifies his aristocratic interlocutor’s “authenticity” with the ability to listen to an inner voice – the voice of nationalism, an emotion that justifies itself by itself. It

42 The analysis of this story is clearly relevant for the late nineteenth-century Argentine historiography concerned with the construction of a national pantheon. The involvement of a European Jewish refugee in such a fundamentally *criollo* and nationalistic topic is, in my view, an intentional irony by Borges. Indeed, he is personally attracted to heroes, but, on a more conceptual level, he is also ashamed of the superficiality of the exchange between two men he deems vain (Bolívar and San Martín), which he then attempts to frame as the corollary of a philosophy (Schopenhauer’s). It would seem, then, that the historian from Prague does not believe in the literality of texts and, contrary to his perhaps more naive Argentine-born counterpart, the Jewish historian prefers a method based on clues, symptoms, and insights.

43 On the subject position of exile of Enzo Traverso, *La Pensée Dispersée: Figures de l’Exil Judéo-Allemand* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2004). See also the classic text by Hannah Arendt, “Between Pariah and Parvenu,” in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 56-68. On the subject of immigration, Diaspora, and Argentine Jewish identity, see Raanan Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines? Essays on History, Ethnicity and Diaspora* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2010).

44 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 441.

does so by masking quasi-magical preconceptions with a language of authenticity. In Borges, nationalism is based on unexamined intuitions about the nation and the Self. Nationalism is unreason insofar as it is only expressed by the soul, that is to say, by desire. In contrast, Zimmermann equates his own historical method with the act of reading. Conceptualizing, observing and verifying evidence are central features of Zimmermann's methodology as a historian.

All in all, the Argentine Jewish historian Zimmerman represents critical reason, but his status as a person is necessarily unstable. He is established in contemporary Argentina but he does not have a place of reference in the past. This is a sharp contrast with his interlocutor, who asks Zimmermann:

– Are you from Prague, Dr?

– I was from Prague – Zimmermann answered.

The lack of a relational identification with the past does not prevent this past from affecting Zimmermann in his new country. The Argentine-born historian tells us about Zimmermann's academic contributions and his proclivity to defend historical losers: "From his works (without a doubt of great value) I was only able to examine a vindication of the Semitic republic of Carthage, which posterity judges from the perspective of its enemies, the Roman historians. I also examined a sort of essay where Zimmermann argues that the government should not be a visible and pathetic function."<sup>45</sup>

Zimmermann's liberalism is diametrically opposed to fascist totalitarian views of the state. But, more importantly, his subjective identity formation as a Jewish intellectual guarantees the same Nazi reception of his work as was the case with Jaromir Hladík in "The Secret Miracle."

Later we read: "This argument met the decisive refutation of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger showed, through photocopies of newspaper headlines, that the modern head of state, far from being anonymous, is the protagonist ... the dancing David that pampers the drama of his people, ... Heidegger also proved that Zimmermann's lineage was Hebraic, or better put, Jewish. This publication by the venerated existentialist was the immediate cause of our guest's exodus and nomadic activities."<sup>46</sup>

A particular adjective is what objectifies the identity of the victim, as the perpetrators (from the Nazi Martin Heidegger to the Nazi Julius Rothe) understand it.

45 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 439.

46 Ibid.

This adjective also defines Nazi fascist ideology insofar as it represents its conceived antithesis: the Jew. For the Nazis, Judaism is an identity that cannot be substantiated or denied with empirical knowledge. Rather, it is an a priori fact of totalitarian ideology.

Borges himself was accused of being a Jew by the Argentine fascist newspaper *Crisol*. Borges sarcastically responded that he accepted the charges. By occupying the place of the victim, Borges explored the experience of the Other in Argentine society, but only up to a point. There was an objective ethnic boundary that he explicitly demarcated. His ludic response to the newspaper did not transcend literary experimentation. Borges made clear to his readers that he was not actually Jewish.

Who has not, at some point, played the game of the ancestors, the game of the pre-histories of his flesh and blood? I do this often, and many times I was not repelled by the possibility of thinking myself as Jewish. This is a lazy hypothesis, it is a sedentary and frugal adventure that harms no one – it does not even damage the reputation of Israel because my Judaism was without words, like the songs of Mendelssohn.<sup>47</sup>

For Borges, being Jewish was a matter of hope and from this vantage point he refuted his antisemitic critics: “*Crisol*, in its edition of January 30th, wanted to flatter that retrospective hope of mine [of being Jewish]. *Crisol* talks about my ‘maliciously hidden Jewish origins’ (the participle and the adverb amaze me).”<sup>48</sup>

This appropriation of the identity of the victim was ambivalent. Borges believed it necessary to clarify that, contrary to Hladík or Zimmerman, the Borges family was of true Spanish background and that his antisemitic critics were simply wrong.<sup>49</sup>

Borges did not really establish a dialogue with a mythology for fascist consumption, but he contested its assumptions with an imagined historical genealogy and his own fantasies and ludic mythologies. He did not believe that the collapsing of identities was exclusive to fascism. In fact, he often described his own trajectory as that of a creator of cosmopolitan mythologies, including his own playful ascription of Jewish identity. However, he clearly established a dichotomy between imagined liberal mythologies, artificially conceived and carefully articulated, and the fascist mythological moment of

47 Jorge Luis Borges, “Yo, Judío” *Megáfono* 3:12 (April 1934), p. 2. The accusation published in *Crisol* would recur, for instance, in “La ‘Prensa’ Judaizada,” *Nuevo Orden*, April 30, 1941, p. 11.

48 Borges, “Yo, Judío,” p. 2.

49 Ibid.

a mere return to barbarism. Fascism denies the demands of the present and embraces the manipulation of a malleable past: “Like the Druses, like the moon, like death, like next week, the remote past is one of those things that ignorance can feed from.”<sup>50</sup>

For Borges, the fascist enactment of mythology was founded in the longing for this “remote past,” and as such this past “is endlessly smooth and pleasant. It is much more obliging than the future and it demands less efforts. It is the favorite station for mythologies.”<sup>51</sup>

In contesting fascist notions of the past, Borges understandably tended to emphasize the global contextual trends shared by victims and victimizers (and maybe also the observers) but, at the same time, he was prone to collapse contextual differences and distinctions between them. In fact, for Borges, Judaism was a universal entity. Judaism, like Kafka, lacked, in his view, any particularity.<sup>52</sup> Borges, in general, did not distinguish between Jewishness as signifying a particular group of people (ethnic or religious) and Judaism as a universal culture. In 1941, Borges stated that such universality of Judaism was a source of personal identification and the “principal” reason “for me not to be antisemitic.” He argued that the “difference between Jews and non-Jews seems to me, in general, insignificant; sometimes illusory or imperceptible.”<sup>53</sup>

It is not the loss of Jewish identity as much as the loss of German cultural traditions that concerned Borges: “I am personally offended, less because of Israel and more because of Germany; less because of the insulted community and more because of the insulting nation. I am not sure that the world can exist without German civilization.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, his indignation regarding the loss of German identity went hand in hand with amazement. This amazement was also provoked by the gradual symbiosis between Hitler and Germany. He explained this wonder as deriving from the uncanny, the foreignness of Nazism vis-à-vis Germany.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 On several occasions, Borges took part in anti-fascist campaigns against antisemitism. He also held antisemitic positions in private conversations. While he was not Jewish, he wrote stories with Jewish narrators and used Jewish identity as a subject position for interpretation. Regarding Borges’s activities in the antifascist campaigns against antisemitism see IWO Archive, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Caja Organización Popular contra el Antisemitismo, Correspondencia Panfletos, Publicaciones C, 1936-1937 C, 1939.

53 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 102.

54 Jorge Luis Borges, “Una pedagogía del odio,” *Sur* 32 (May 1937), p. 81.

Hitler became the object of Borgean hatred precisely due to his brutality and his lack of cosmopolitan German *Bildung*: “I abominate of Hitler precisely because he does not share my faith in the German people, and also because he believes that in order to get even with 1918, there is no other pedagogy than barbarism and no better stimulus than the concentration camps.”<sup>55</sup>

Borges was less concerned with Hitler than with his intellectual followers in Europe and Latin America. He worried about those followers of fascism renouncing a culture that Hitler never had. Antisemitism was a practical symptom of a universal ideology. Without engaging in nationalism, Borges sought to emphasize national cultural distinctions as distinctive elements of modern secular cosmopolitanism, and how these distinctions were rooted in a shared notion of modernity that actually contradicted the absolute transnational character of fascism. He clearly recognized the Catholic self-ascription of Argentine fascist antisemitism, but he also noted the global connections that put its Argentine nature into question. “Certain ungrateful Catholics – that is, people affiliated with the Church of Rome, which is a dissident Israelite sect with Italian personnel, open to its customers on holidays and Sundays – want to introduce a sinister doctrine, with confessed German, Ruthenian, Russian, Valachian and Moldovan origins.”<sup>56</sup> Borges clearly equated antisemitism with a brand of Argentine right-wing Catholicism. Moreover, Borges ironically presented the “obscene word ‘antisemitism’” as a “somber rosary” that makes “the alarmed Argentine” think about a “conspiracy.”<sup>57</sup>

Antisemitism could be Argentine or German, but in Argentina it was anchored in a mistaken reading of an otherwise plural Christianity: “Those who recommend its use often blame the Jews, all of them, for the Crucifixion of Christ. They forget that their own faith has declared that the Cross made our redemption. They forget that blaming

55 “Yo abomino, precisamente, de Hitler porque ni comparto mi fe en el pueblo alemán; porque juzga que para desquitarse de 1918, no hay otra pedagogía que la barbarie, ni mejor estímulo que los campos de concentración.” Jorge Luis Borges, “Ensayo de imparcialidad,” *Sur* 61 (October 1939), p. 28.

56 *Mundo Israelita*, August 20th, 1932, p. 1.

57 On the history of Argentine antisemitism see Leonardo Senkman (ed.), *El antisemitismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ceal, 1989), Daniel Lvovich, *Nacionalismo y antisemitismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Vergara, 2003) and his “Una intervención de Borges contra el antisemitismo,” *Nuestra Memoria* 22 (2003). See also Federico Finchelstein, *La Argentina Fascista: Los orígenes ideológicos de la dictadura* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2008), chapter 3.

the Jews is tantamount to blaming vertebrates or mammals.”<sup>58</sup> Beyond the irony lies the motif of universalism. For Borges this was the key feature of the Judeo-Christian dimensions of Western culture. He ironically presented Jewish universality as an emblem of the sacred. In this context, Borges de-mythologized the religious past as a source of contextual embarrassment and political anachronism for Argentine clerico-fascists:

They forget that when Christ decided to be a man, he preferred to be Jewish. He did not choose to be French or even porteño [a citizen of Buenos Aires]. He did not choose to live in 1932 after Jesus Christ, so he could get a one-year subscription to *Le Roseau d’Or*. They forget that Jesus, certainly, was not a convert to Judaism. The *basílica de Luján* [a famous church in Buenos Aires Province] for him would have been a spectacle as indecipherable as a calendar, a gas heater or an antisemite....<sup>59</sup>

In his fiction at this time, Borges depicted Catholic antisemites as anti-Christian. This can be seen, for example, in “Death and the Compass” (1942), in the dialogue between an antisemitic police inspector, Treviranus, and a Jewish journalist from a Yiddish newspaper published in Buenos Aires. Treviranus rejects history as a clue for criminal interpretation and argues: “I am a poor Christian.... Carry off those *musty volumes* if you want; I don’t have any time to waste on Jewish superstitions.” The Jewish intellectual who, like Borges, is “myopic, atheistic and very shy,” answers Treviranus that Christianity is, above all, a form of Jewish superstition.<sup>60</sup>

Borges contrasted universalism (as a humanistic worldview) with global or transnational antisemitism and fascism. For Borges, fascism was not a misguided reading of culture but a nationalist rejection of universal civilization. In fascism, the subjectivity of the Other is rejected and with it the possibility of an ethico-political form

58 *Mundo Israelita*, August 20, 1932, p. 1.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 500; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 79. In her suggestive analysis, Louis notes that the Argentine fascist publications presented in the story (*La Cruz de la Espada* and *El Mártir*, edited by Ernst Palast-Ernesto Palacio), contrast what is Jewish to what is Christian and define the events as a “pogrom clandestino y frugal.” See Louis, *Borges ante el fascismo*, p. 259.

of self-awareness. Transnational fascism rejects reason and embraces superstition. For Argentinean readers of the 1940s, the character Zur Linde synthesized two fascist national myths, the Argentine and the German fascist rejections of reason, insofar as both were under the spell of global fascism. But Zur Linde seems to acknowledge the Borgean objection to the Argentine fascist appropriation of Christianity as artificial. Zur Linde is pagan or even anti-Christian. Far from religion, Zur Linde embraces a reified form of victimization.

### The Gaze of Trauma

In Borges, interpretative emphasis is placed less on victims than on those who inflicted the trauma. According to the Borgean gaze, the assassins participate in a process of degradation of civilization that they can only understand at the end of their lives. This belated understanding escapes their victims. Victims obviously do not choose trauma, while Zur Linde finds ideological meaning in his own death. In the Borgean narrative of Nazism, both victims and victimizers encounter death. Zur Linde is the subject of a criminal trial. The evidence against him is substantial and he does not deny it. In contrast, in Hladík's case one finds a summary trial which is explicitly Kafkaian.

Terror and death are the essential dimensions of Hladík's "Trial": "*Hladík's first reaction* was mere terror. He felt he would not have shrunk from the *gallows*, the block, or the knife, but that death by a firing squad was unbearable. In vain he tried to convince himself that the plain, unvarnished fact of dying was the fearsome thing, not the attendant circumstances, *senselessly trying* to exhaust all their possible variations. He infinitely anticipated the process of his dying, from the sleepless dawn to the *mysterious volley*."<sup>61</sup> Here, as elsewhere in Borges, the torture suffered by the victims is contrasted to the values of reason, as Borges understands them.

This form of torture is that of Kafka's *The Trial*, in the sense that victims are unable to understand the reasons behind their victimization. In this context, death does not have a meaning. But Borges decides to move away from Kafka at the moment when God freezes time and space for Hladík, just before his execution. The divinity stops time in order for Hladík to finish the writing of his play, which is symptomatically entitled *The Enemies*. In this framework death acquires a transcendental meaning and the Kafkaian universe of the play becomes part of the structural sense of its author's life. Reality is thus ordered and reconstructed in the mind of the victim. In other words, it is framed as such beyond the reality principle. Zur Linde, Hladík and David Jerusalem

61 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 509; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 89.

are embedded in the schizophrenic world of the Shoah. Living under different circumstances, the three of them are unable to deny the charges. They all accept their impending death.<sup>62</sup>

However, victims do not justify the destruction of their bodies. In contrast, the perpetrator Zur Linde accepts his personal defeat because he sees it as a corporeal sacrifice for something nobler than himself: “An inexorable epoch is spreading over the world. We forged it, we who are already its victim. What matters if England is the hammer and we the anvil, so long as violence reigns and not servile Christian timidity? If victory and injustice and happiness are not for Germany, let them be for other nations.”<sup>63</sup> In Zur Linde’s view, history is a mythical artifact. The experience of the Holocaust opens up the possibility of a fascist future without the fascists that had conceived it. The myth of fascist violence remains and is now epochal. It is here to stay. Zur Linde, the leader of the concentration camp universe, now embodies the impossible fascist conflation of the biological and the political. The ideological imperative of fascism triumphs over his own body and the materiality of everything else. “I look at myself in the mirror to discover who I am, to discern how I will act in a few hours, when I am face to face with death. My flesh may be afraid; I am not.”<sup>64</sup>

Zur Linde realizes that he has almost achieved his desire to leave behind the human in him. He no longer feels fear. This lack of humanity is absolutely ideological in the fascist sense. So is the violence, insofar as terror is Nazism’s final aim. “So long as violence rules” (“Lo importante es que rija la violencia”), Zur Linde declares.

The radical rupture of the “ego” (*yo*) that the Nazi perpetrator experiences, in other words, the total separation between fear on the one hand and death and a Self that, losing corporeality, becomes an absolute representation of ideology, reveals an ideological world in which violent desire reigns without normative restrictions. Fascism promotes the elimination of norms and the imposition of the rule of violence. The result is an effervescence that continually acquires its own substantiation in the traumatic. It displaces the threshold of political and ethical stability through the objectification of the Other and the sacrifice of the Self.

Borges noted, however, that fascist society does not intend to be anomic. Rather, it is marked by the principle of the leader, the *Führerprinzip*. The fascist hero’s desire replaces the normative legacy of the enlightenment and its values. The leader’s desire becomes the law. If desire represents the only possible legality, nothing is clearly legal.

62 Jerusalem finally commits suicide in the face of Zur Linde’s torture.

63 Borges, *Obras Completas I*, p. 581; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 147.

64 Ibid.



This situation is symptomatic of fascism's centripetal tendency toward self-destruction. The lack of norms signals a world in which "happiness" and "injustice" go together.

For Zur Linde, the elimination of the ego even applies to Hitler himself. Hitler's "ego" is displaced by his "will and the blood."<sup>65</sup> Here fascism conceives the ego as providing false consciousness rather than self-understanding. In Zur Linde's testimony, the victim and death are unified by the logic of sacrifice. For Zur Linde, the victim's Holocaust is inevitable. For him it is equally inevitable that the assassin (that is himself) also needs to die. Thus, Zur Linde presents his own sacrificial immolation as a product of his belief in "violence and the faith of the sword."<sup>66</sup>

In the perpetrators' eyes, their own sacrifice makes them one with their victims. The annihilation of the ego, its loss within a moral absolute of effervescent desire, is eventually recognized as an ideological mandate which presents the gift of death as the sacrifice of the Self.<sup>67</sup> The new era of violence, although presented as "perfection," represents in reality a grotesque return to the repressed that, as LaCapra has stated, is a central theme in Nazism's ideology and practice.<sup>68</sup>

The "New Order" begins, according to Nazism, with the sacrifice, not only of the victims, but also of their victimizers. As Zur Linde states: "Let Heaven exist, even though our dwelling place is Hell" ("*Que el cielo exista, aunque nuestro lugar sea el infierno*").

The theme of the sacrifice of the ego for the sake of the ideology of barbarism constituted a significant and yet not sufficiently recognized contribution of Borges to the theory of catastrophe. In an essay from 1939 Borges anticipated Zur Linde's sacrificial argument in a strikingly similar way, but he inverted the position of the subject. Borges, as bystander, would never sacrifice himself for the sake of ideology. He claimed that if he had "the honor of being German" he would never "sacrifice intelligence and probity." In contrast with his imagined Nazi, Borges argues that "it is possible that a German defeat would mean the ruin of Germany; it is indisputable that a German victory would mean the ruin and the debasement of the world."

Zur Linde is able to identify the indelible stigma of trauma produced by the universe of the camps. This stigma also, but not equally, prevails in the memories of the victims. Borges would later define this situation as a mark of the post-Holocaust Jewish condition. He speaks of this in the face he describes in his poem "Israel" (1969):

65 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 580.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, pp. 169-203.

“a face condemned to be a mask ... a man lapidated, burned and drowned in lethal chambers.”<sup>69</sup> Such is the stigma of sacrifice – it makes sense only according to the fascist logic of its perpetrators. But this ludic interplay of meaning, of interchangeable subjectivities in the mirroring images of perpetrators and victims, has its limits. For Borges the “masks” of both Zur Linde and Hladík are removed. Their search for ultimate understanding is reached through death. When Borges assumes a Jewish ego in his fiction and non-fiction and identifies with the victims, he appropriates their trauma. This ostensibly offers total understanding for the observer (or belated bystander) and readers. Yet this understanding is the outcome of a sacrificial view. Sacrifice acquires meaning in the Borgean interpretation of fascism, but at the cost of the framing of trauma, and more importantly its domestication. Trauma is domesticated as a symbol of that which Lacan analyzes as “the Real,” that is, the unconscious.<sup>70</sup> In this framework, trauma becomes a metaphor of the fascist unconscious, of a totalitarian ideology that, like Zur Linde, rejects critical reason.<sup>71</sup> The Borgean gaze, so perceptive in understanding Zur Linde (and fascism), ultimately seems to sacrifice the victims by transforming them into agents of knowledge illuminated by trauma. Hladík’s success as an author, his achievement of closure, is the product of the gift of death that his murderers granted him. In this regard, even God in the story might seem to agree, or at least not disagree, with the Nazis.

Hladík understands, and of course despises, the insanity of Nazism, but the effects of this ideology give him meaning as a Jewish anti-fascist writer and intellectual. Moreover, it would seem that in Borges, Nazism gives the victims the possibility of writing under the effects of trauma. These traumatic charges illuminate their analytical skill and provide them with the will to “redeem” themselves: “*He [Hladík] felt that the plot I have just sketched was best contrived to cover up his defects and point up his abilities and held the possibility of allowing him to redeem (symbolically) the meaning of his life.*”<sup>72</sup> However, in a typical Borgean operation, after the achievement of understanding, the symptoms of madness and death return. It cannot be otherwise. Borges emphasizes the centrality of the calculating methods of Nazi victimization.

69 Borges, *Obras Completas* II, p. 375.

70 Lacan, *Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 55-6, 68-70, 121-31, 275.

71 On the fascist unconscious and psychoanalytic theory, see Federico Finchelstein, “Fascism Becomes Desire: On Freud, Mussolini and Transnational Politics,” in Mariano Plotkin and Joy Damousi (eds.), *The Transnational Unconscious: essays in the history of psychoanalysis and transnationalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 97-126.

They serve an ideology rooted in the instinctual forces of desire and barbarism. Victims can search for and achieve meaning but they can never understand fascist ideology. In Borges, their illumination is transitory. It is almost an illusion. After understanding, Hladík is restored to his previous state of numbness. Hladík returns to the lived trauma to again be drowned in its midst. The return of his senses restores him to reality. In this context, he is a lost victim: “He *concluded his drama*. He had only the problem of a single phrase. He found it. The drop of water slid down *his* cheek. He opened *his* mouth in a maddened cry, moved *his* face, dropped under the quadruple blast. *Jaromir Hladík died* on March 29, at 9:02 am.”<sup>73</sup>

One might argue that Hladík’s understanding, his deciphering of symbols, was, at the end, a denial of his traumatic condition, but this is only one dimension of the Borgean text. The participation of the sacred seems to give meaning to a death that does not have any meaningful secular connotation. More measured, and more engaged in a sort of empathic unsettlement, the Borgean representation of the last days and hours of David Jerusalem is that of the *Musselman*. As in Primo Levi’s description of them, Zur Linde prompts Jerusalem to abandon the world and its realities.<sup>74</sup> As in the case of the death of Doctor Marcelo Yarmolinsky, the kabbalist who is murdered in cold blood in “La Muerte y la Brújula” (“Death and the Compass,” 1942), the death of Jerusalem is the outcome of a break of the normative condition. It symbolizes the return of the repressed, the past, life and above all, death, “the secret morphology of the evil series” (la “secreta morfología de la malvada serie”).<sup>75</sup> Borges does not attempt to understand Jerusalem and he narrates the suicide of this ghost-like figure

72 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, p. 510; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 91.

73 Borges, *Obras Completas* I, pp. 512-3; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 94.

74 On the *Musselman* see Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). On the concept of empathic unsettlement see LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 78.

75 This is the case of detective Erik Lönnroth, the rational, and eventually misguided, investigator of the symbolic. Lönnroth follows the conceptual traces that, according to his interpretation, were left behind by the killers in the assassination of the kabbalist Marcelo Yarmolinsky. He ends up assassinated in the story and we learn that the explanation for both crimes is not symbolic and conceptually sophisticated, but rather explicitly selfish and grounded in ordinary human actions. Yarmolinsky was not killed for symbolic reasons. He is robbed and killed by the same perpetrators who, in an act of revenge, also kill Lönnroth.

not as a decision motivated by the reality of trauma but rather as rejection of this reality through the recourse to madness and desperation.<sup>76</sup>

Jerusalem has the traumatic stigma of Auschwitz, but unlike Zur Linde, he does not understand. Only fascist ideologues understand the logic of a system of symbols that debases reason and reifies the unconscious. The inner self is presented as the bearer of a corporal mark. Jerusalem is a symbol of the trauma of reason and the regression to the repressed. He is a victim of transnational fascism. His defeat is that of the civilizing process. Fascism annihilates the progressive pacification of social space. It inscribes its defeat in the bodies of the victims. In this sense, Jerusalem is given the same ideological stigma that Elie Wiesel was able to recognize as a ruptured fractioning of the self. But Wiesel is not able to understand this after his liberation when, after battling life and death for two weeks in a hospital, he looks at himself in a mirror: "I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me."<sup>77</sup>

76 Borges, *Obras Completas I*, p. 579; Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 145.

77 Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 109.