

THE THEME OF LOVESICKNESS IN "EL ZAHIR"



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Together with "El Aleph", "El Zahir" stands out as one of the most suggestive narratives in terms of its literary and psychological interpretations. Estela Canto, with whom Borges was in love at the time, gives us an important key to the interpretation of both stories when she says:

El amor de Borges era romántico, exaltado, tenía una especie de pureza juvenil. Al parecer, se entregaba completamente, suplicando no ser rechazado, convirtiendo a la mujer en un ídolo inalcanzable, al cual no se atrevía a aspirar.

Me repetía que él era Dante, que yo era Beatrice y que habría de liberarlo del infierno. (81, 95)

As we will see, Canto's description very well matches Borges's psychology of love in his contemporary essays on Dante ("enamorarse es crear una religión cuyo dios es falible", *OC* 3: 371), and confirms the sense of despair and fatalism with which the erotic theme is portrayed in "El Zahir" as well as in some of his mature lyrics.

Years later, questioned about the Dantean allusions braided in "El Aleph", the author denied any symbolical meaning in the story, whilst on the other hand he asserted the historical reality of its characters: "Beatriz Viterbo really existed and I was very much and

hopelessly in love with her. I wrote my story after her death. Carlos Argentino Daneri is a friend of mine, still living" (Di Giovanni 264). Here we have Borges's satirical humour at its best. Indeed, while pretending to disclose the truth about his narrative, he actually reinforces the parallel with his literary model: like Beatrice Portinari, Beatriz Viterbo "really existed"; like Dante, he was "hopelessly in love with her"; like the *Vita nuova*, his story is intended as a tribute "after her death"; like Guido Cavalcanti (Dante's "primo amico" to whom the *Vita nuova* is dedicated), Daneri is a real "friend" who, presumably, shares not only her memory but also his literary dream (see Paoli *Percorsi* 9-49; id. "Borges e Dante" 189-212; Thiem 97-121; Menocal 132-75; Almeida 74-99).

In fact, two years after the publication of "El Aleph" Borges returned to the theme of the dead woman. As Rodríguez Monegal points out, "El Zahir" is the story of an erotic obsession projected in a magical object:

In "The Zahir" Borges uses the cabbalistic superstition of a magical coin to weave the story of a man who becomes obsessed with a twenty-cent Argentine coin he received at a bar. The coin is a symbol of Clementina. To be obsessed by it is a way of saying he is obsessed by her. (...) But Borges being Borges, he has to disguise the erotic fixation with his erudite, cabbalistic narrative. (...) If in "The Zahir" the erudite allusions distract the reader from the story's secret center, (...) in "The Aleph" the obsession is plainly presented: what is displaced is the model the story is based on. (413-14)

Although not everybody would agree with the rather succinct way in which the critic dismisses the complex web of literary allusions that make up the story, I think that he is right in seeing this as a basic narrative technique whereby Borges effectively "distracts" the reader's attention from its hidden centre. And yet the interest of the story lies precisely in this enigmatic literary texture, as well as in the way Borges plays with the poetic tradition of love-madness in order to produce his own version of it. True, there are deep psychological elements in it but these, I think, are more interesting when they are confronted with the intertextual aspect of his writing. The irony here consists in the realization that what is said about Borges's "erudite" allusions (that they only help to distract the readers atten-

tion), applies to the author himself: through the playful (re)construction of his stories Borges endeavoured to escape the fears and obsessions which haunted his existence. Indeed the idea of literature as a pastime that helps to liberate the mind is a frequent theme in Borges, particularly during the 30s and 40s. As he puts it in the story, "la ejecución de esa fruslería (en cuyo decurso intercalé, pseudoeruditamente, algún verso de la *Fáfrismál*) me permitió olvidar la moneda" (592; see also OC 1: 291; Canto 141).

Borges's fascination with the multiplicity of meaning inherent in poetic language, as well as his frequent recourse to symbolism and allegory, is a well-known theme. Borges himself suggests on various occasions the existence of various levels of meaning in his short stories. "El Zahir" is no exception. In fact, the very title of the composition alludes to this. Like the literal sense in Christian exegesis, the term *zahir* is used in Islamic hermeneutics to refer to the outward interpretation of the Koran. Together with the exoteric meaning, the Koran has a deeper inward meaning, one which is not manifested but invisible (*batin*). However, the relationship between the visible and the invisible is reciprocal, since God Himself is both *az-Zahir* and *al-Batin*, He is the Manifest and the Hidden (Fishburn & Hughes 264; Bernès I: 1607-608; Corbin 70-95). These make part of the modes of the divine Presence to which Borges refers in the story: "*Zahir*, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible; en tal sentido es uno de los noventa y nueve nombres de Dios" (593). In Sufi mysticism, furthermore, every manifestation in the sensible world is a reflection of an invisible reality. For the mystic, every external event (*zahir*) constitutes a symbolic expression charged with spiritual significance (*batin*). This gives rise to a series of conceptual oppositions which are the characteristic mark of Sufi language. Borges was undoubtedly acquainted with some of its representatives, particularly with the work of Attar, whose allegorical poem *The Conference of Birds* (*Mantiq al-Tayr*) left a deep impression on him. Its influence can be perceived in "El Zahir" (particularly in the narrator's bewilderment, which alludes to one of the stages attained by the wayfarers in Attar's poem), although in the story Borges actually refers to the *Book of the Secrets* or *Asrar-Nama*. Here, in the opening verses in praise of God, Attar expresses the paradox of the divine Essence which is

hidden in its visibility, manifest in its concealment: "Un (Dieu) Apparent qui est Caché par sa manifestation un (Dieu) caché qui est plus manifeste que la lumière" (*Livre des secrets* 25).

The doctrine that inspires the religious and ethical conception of the Sufis is the desire of union with God through love. Indeed the importance of the doctrine of mystical love in Sufism cannot be overstated. It is through the increasing experience of love that the mystic can progress from the prison of the self unto God. Only by destroying the idolatry of the self can he get closer to God's will, only through the power of divine love can he attain the true essence of being (Nicholson 18-19; Smith 25-26).

Returning to Borges, both in "El Aleph" and in "El Zahir" the image of the dead woman stands as a reminder of the world's vanity and of the transient condition of human life. Time will inevitably bring forth change and oblivion, the protagonist of "El Aleph" seems to imply as he recalls that the day Beatriz died coincided with a new publicity advertisement in the Plaza Constitución (Donald Shaw 71-72; Ortega 181-86). Borges's critique of human vanity is more plainly stated in "El Zahir". The story begins as a kind of parodic obituary full of sardonic humour. Teodelina Villar, a fashion model appropriately raised to the standard of an 'evil goddess' (note the pun in her name), falls in disgrace (that is, public scandal and financial ruin). Rather than accepting the discomforts of her life, she seems to opt for a more radical solution-suicide:

Sus retratos, hacia 1930, obstruían las revistas mundanas. (...) Teodelina Villar se preocupaba menos de la belleza que de la perfección. (...) Las normas de su credo no eran eternas, sino que se plegaban a los azares de París o de Hollywood. Su vida era ejemplar y, sin embargo, la roía sin tregua una desesperación interior. Ensayaba continuas metamorfosis, como para huir de sí misma; el color de su pelo y las formas de su peinado eran famosamente inestables. También cambiaban la sonrisa, la tez, el sesgo de los ojos. (...) Un extranjero de quien ella siempre había desconfiado se permitió abusar de su buena fe para venderle una porción de sombreros cilíndricos; al año se propaló que esos adefesios (...) no eran sombreros sino arbitrarios y desautorizados caprichos. Las *desgracias* no vienen solas; el doctor Villar tuvo que mudarse a la calle Aráoz y el retrato de su hija decoró anuncios de cremas y de automóviles. (...) El *siniestro* departamen-

to de Aráoz resultó demasiado oneroso; el seis de junio, Teodelina Villar *cometió el solecismo* de morir en pleno Barrio Sur. ¿Confesaré que, movido por la más sincera de las pasiones argentinas, el esnobismo, yo estaba enamorado de ella y que su muerte me afectó hasta las lágrimas? Quizá ya lo haya sospechado el lector. (589-90; my italics)

Apart from Borges's extraordinary sense of humour (note the pervading play with the double meaning of words), the passage abounds in Dantean resonances. I will explore these later on. What I would like to point out first, however, is the contrast between the mystical background that the story evokes and the sheer wittiness that it displays. In other words, against the story's literary framework the author sets up a concrete cultural reality that seems to negate it entirely. From this perspective, "El Zahir" is a masterpiece of Spanish American satirical writing providing a contrast in moral values between the two worlds that the narrator confronts, that of literature and that of actual life—I differ from Estela Canto's assessment of the story as being "uno de los cuentos menos logrados de Borges" (191).

In his study on Borges's work, John M. Cohen characterizes "El Zahir" as "a story of mystical obsession" (80). I think, however, that it is necessary to make two important distinctions: (1) the story is related to a mystical obsession in a figurative sense only; the real obsession is sexual love; (2) the nature of the story is not tragic, as the critic's subsequent interpretation suggests (80-81), but comic, both in its social critique (the satirical portrayal of the Argentinean bourgeoisie) as well as in the caricaturesque treatment with which the author represents his own emotions. This is not to say that the story lacks a serious side to it; but the mood in which it is presented and its mystical background are meant to create a sense of mockery and disdain, rather than a metaphysical terror before "the pit of nothingness" (81). To take Borges's fiction too solemnly—particularly during this period—can be misleading because we may leave out the intense sarcasm that ignites it from within.

On the other hand, the meaning of the story is not pre-empted by its social content. It can also be read in a lower key as a statement about the author's difficulties in his sentimental relationships and

the effect these had on him. In this respect the story is both *zahir* and *batin*, in the sense that the literal meaning conceals a more personal design. This is stated through symbols and metaphors, such as the twenty-cent coin and the enigmatic but fictitious verse which the narrator ascribes to the *Asrar Nama*, “el Zahir es la sombra de la Rosa y la rasgadura del Velo” (594). Indeed the transfer of meaning through the displacement and substitution of the linguistic sign is insinuated by the author himself: “Me distrajo la tarea de componer un relato fantástico. Éste encierra dos o tres perífrasis enigmáticas — en lugar de *sangre* pone *agua de la espada*; en lugar de *oro*, *lecho de la serpiente*— y está escrito en primera persona” (592). Here the displacement of the signifier (“en lugar de”) constitutes the model for the mechanics of the unconscious which is at work in the story (on this issue see Woscoboinik 77-80; Lacan 493-528).

The fact that Borges chose an Islamic background for his story should not come as a surprise. Indeed, Borges's passion for the *Arabian Nights* is well known, and it is precisely in the exotic lure of its narrative that he encountered from an early age some of the finest erotic stories of world literature. These remained among his favourite readings all his life. As Rodríguez Monegal points out, Burton's translation with its “detailed footnotes on sexual mores” must have impressed the young Borges (119). Actually, one of the things that must have touched him most is the frankness with which the Oriental world deals with sex as well as the religious reverence that it attaches to sexual union, making of it a symbol of the unity of God. Borges alludes to the sacredness of the erotic when he states at the end of the story: “Quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios” (595) From this perspective, the physical rapture of orgasm is analogous to the experience of the Divine in mystical ecstasy (see *OC* 3: 31).

Borges's enigmatic expression (“el Zahir es la sombra de la Rosa y la rasgadura del Velo”) includes two terms widely used in Sufi imagery. The rose is a universal symbol of beauty; notwithstanding, few literary traditions have used the image of the rose so extensively as the Persian. Here the rose—an emblem of creation—is made to represent the beauty of God. Borges himself used the image of the rose as the title for one of his later collection of poems, *La rosa profunda*. Its final poem, “*The Unending Rose*” (*OC* 3: 116), pays tribute to such

a tradition. Outside the mystical context, however, the rose has more sensual implications. Thus it can represent feminine beauty or, more generally, become an expression of human love and desire. Within this temporal dimension the rose acquires an ephemeral quality, for it no longer signifies the eternal glory of God but the vicissitudes and inevitable delusions of love.

In the European poetic tradition, on the other hand, the symbol of the rose has a long history. However, it is particularly associated with the *Roman de la Rose*, an allegorical love-poem which exerted great influence in the subsequent vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages. In the *Roman*, the rose-bud represents the love of the maiden. It is towards the possession of the rose that the lover's attention is directed. In this sense the rose is a substitute for carnal desire, although its poetic possibilities in the poem are not confined to the purely sexual (Lewis 129; Gunn 452 n. 6, 302-05).

More complex and personal in meaning is the first noun of the coupling, "sombra". In one of the poems in *La rosa profunda* we find the word denoting something mysterious and esoteric. Thus after presenting a catalogue of personal objects and memories, the poet says in an incisive tone: "Ciertamente son talismanes, pero de nada sirven contra la sombra que no puedo nombrar, contra la sombra que no debo nombrar", ("Talismanes", OC 3: 111). The exclusion of a sentimental relationship from the list seems to imply that what is not named is precisely sexual love (the reference to Cecilia Ingenieros in line 8 lacks any erotic connotation, and so is the word 'amor' in line 16, which seems to allude either to love of friendship or to filial and maternal love). This view is corroborated in "El amenazado", a prose poem included in another collection (*El oro de los tigres*, OC 2: 485). Here he uses the word "talismanes" in exactly the same sense (that is, as a collection of personal objects and memories which cannot offer, or substitute, something essential which is not possessed); however, the erotic anxiety concealed in the former poem is disclosed with an amazing pathological intensity:

Es el amor. Tendré que ocultarme o que huir.

Crecen los muros de su cárcel, como en un sueño atroz. La hermosa máscara ha cambiado, pero como siempre es la única. ¿De qué me servirán mis talismanes: el ejercicio de las letras, la vaga erudición, el

aprendizaje de las palabras que usó el áspero Norte para cantar sus mares y sus espadas, la serena amistad, las galerías de la Biblioteca, las cosas comunes, los hábitos, el joven amor de mi madre, la sombra militar de mis muertos, la noche intemporal, el sabor del sueño?

Estar contigo o no estar contigo es la medida de mi tiempo.

Ya el cántaro se quiebra sobre la fuente, ya el hombre se levanta a la voz del ave, ya se han oscurecido los que miran por las ventanas, pero la sombra no ha traído la paz.

Es, ya lo sé, el amor: la ansiedad y el alivio de oír tu voz, la espera y la memoria, el horror de vivir en lo sucesivo.

Es el amor con sus mitologías, con sus pequeñas magias inútiles.

Hay una esquina por la que no me atrevo a pasar.

Ya los ejércitos me cercan, las hordas.

(Esta habitación es irreal; ella no la ha visto.)

El nombre de una mujer me delata.

Me duele una mujer en todo el cuerpo.

The poem circles around one basic idea: love is an enslaving obsession against which the poet feels totally defenceless. The various names that the object of love assumes conceal a single power: behind the beloved's image lie hidden the irrational forces of desire which the poet is unable to control ("la hermosa máscara ha cambiado, pero como siempre es la única"). The importance of the poem, however, resides not in its conception of love—the idea of love as a demonic force is a literary commonplace—but in its overt admission that everything else in the poet's life is an artificial construct which he has in vain erected in order to protect himself against its lure (hence the word "talismanes"). Stylistically, Borges criticized this composition for its lack of ambiguity and overt intimacy: "Hay un poema, creo que se llama "El amenazado", que taché de mis libros porque era demasiado íntimo. (...) La poesía necesita algo fabuloso, algo ambiguo, y le faltaba a ese poema. Era una especie de interjección que no podía permitirme en público" (in Wosco-boinik 192; see also Rodríguez Monegal 185-86). Indeed, the poem is quite unusual in its emotional disclosure. In a more characteristic way, Borges would have favoured the use of periphrastic expressions and other rhetorical subterfuges to refer to his erotic obsessions. And yet the composition is unmistakably Borgesian in its nightmarish feeling and in its expression of an archaic terror that

crosses the boundaries of the self. But to return to our present purpose, note the recurrence of the act of naming with regard to the unveiling of an affective fixation: "El nombre de una mujer me delata". Thus, the erotic connotation of the phrase "la sombra que no puedo nombrar, (...) la sombra que no debo nombrar", cited above, is fully revealed. "Sombra" and "nombre" become equivalent, for to disclose the enigma is to utter the word that identifies the object of desire. This connection is already at work in his early lyrics. In "Llamarada", for instance, the expression "la dolorida sombra" is linked to the emotional setting of the composition, while in a poem from *Luna de enfrente* his lack of affective satisfaction is expressed in the verse "Ya no sabe amor de mi sombra" ("La vuelta a Buenos Aires"). There are, furthermore, two passages in Borges's fiction that substantiate this assumption. In *El libro de arena*, one of his later collection of stories, Borges includes two narratives that deal explicitly with sex. In "Ulrica", sexual intercourse is described as a timeless experience: "Secular en la sombra fluyó el amor" (OC 3: 19). The point, however, is that he uses the word "sombra" not simply to create a particular sound effect (note the repetition of the consonant 's') but as a figurative means to represent the ineffability of the moment. The second illustration, from "El Congreso", is much more eloquent. Here the apex of enjoyment is defined in mystical terms as a kind of identity in difference (the parallel with the story of the *simurg* in Attar's poem is inevitable); note also the presence of other mystical expressions, such as "dicha", "claridades", and "contemplándola":

Oh noches, oh compartida y tibia tiniebla, oh el amor que fluye en la sombra como un río secreto, oh aquel momento de la dicha en que cada uno es los dos, oh la inocencia y el candor de la dicha, oh la unión en la que nos perdíamos para perdernos luego en el sueño, oh las primeras claridades del día y yo contemplándola. (OC 3: 29)

Once more, the word "sombra" carries the metaphorical implication of the earlier passage. But even more interesting are the words which precede the scene: "De su boca nació la palabra que yo no me atrevía a decir" (29). That word is sex, as we have just seen, and it unequivocally reveals the essence of what cannot be uttered in "Talismanes". These textual echoes, furthermore, support the general

interpretation of "El Zahir" as a story about a sexual obsession and, in particular, help to perceive the erotic nuance hidden in the phrase "la sombra de la Rosa"—indeed, for Estela Canto the image of the rose has a plain sexual meaning, although she does not develop the relation any further (193).

The expression "la rasgadura del Velo" is equally charged with erotic significance. The image of the veil is found extensively in Sufi discourse to refer to man's ignorance of the Divine Essence. Knowledge of God is a process of unveiling. Here the act of unveiling means to remove the veil of appearance of the phenomenal world in order to gain access to a higher, spiritual order. Unveiling, then, is concerned with the knowledge of what is hidden to the eye. The Koran states it thus: "We have unveiled you, and today your eye is sharp" (50: 22). This action of unveiling, explains Carl Ernst, "still retains the sense of someone ripping-off a veil" (35). The paradox is that in a society where veils play such a crucial role in women's clothing, the action of unveiling cannot be divorced from its erotic, if not voyeuristic, insinuation. "Unveiling", says Ernst, "has the connotation of breaking the barrier of seclusion, of sudden admittance to intimacy" (35). Borges must have been very sensitive to the proper sense of the metaphor and to the fact that mystical gnosis can be expressed through the most sensual of all images: the unveiling of the beloved in a loving encounter (Dante, too, makes use of the image in *Purgatorio* XXXI, 145).

Thus in "El Zahir" the ripping-off of the veil ("la rasgadura del Velo") represents the narrator's desire to remove all barriers between him and his beloved (physical as well as psychological). Indeed the erotic symbolism conveyed in the action of removing an obstacle is made evident in "Ulrica". Here, borrowing an image from the *Völsung Saga*, he writes: "No había una espada entre los dos" (19). In its original context the sword placed between the lovers is a symbol of chastity: "He took the sword Gram and laid it naked between them" (*Saga* 104). This is attested by Brynhild herself after Sigurd's death: "He proved, when he came to me, how he kept his oaths, for he laid between us two the sharp-edged sword that was tempered with poison" (116). Borges retains the sign but gives it a negative twist ("no había"), thereby signifying the consummation of

love as well as the breaking off of his protagonist's virginity. The fact that this story may be the expression of an erotic phantasy, as Osvaldo Sabino has acutely shown (45-47), emphasizes the degree of sexual repression that is at work in the writing of "El Zahir", where such a cathartic mechanism is fiercely truncated. This is clearly stated in the story: "Pronto, quizá demasiado pronto, esa vigilia tendrá fin: las estrellas le han dicho que ya se ha forjado la espada que la *tronchará* para siempre. (...) La aparición de Sigurd *corta bruscamente* la historia" (592; my italics). Here the protagonist is referring to the death of Fafnir, who is killed by Sigurd, but one cannot separate the allusion from the fact that in the Icelandic Saga the same sword will stand as a sexual prohibition whose violation is punished with death: "He said that it had been decreed him that he should accept thus his bridal night, in respect to his wife, or else receive his death" (104). In other words, the mention of the sword in "El Zahir" points towards a sexual fear associated with death (according to Estela Canto, "la actitud de Borges hacia el sexo era de terror pánico, como si temiera la revelación que en él podía hallar", 17). Ironically, in several of Borges's stories this kind of death is perceived as the ultimate liberation of the spirit: "Alguna vez (...) el predestinado acero del héroe —Sigurd o San Jorge o Tristán— penetrará en la sórdida cueva y lo acometerá, lo herirá de muerte y *lo salvará*" (*Borges en Revista Multicolor* 39; my italics; see the editor's remark in page 23). This implicit link confirms the story's sense of fatalism which the narrator feels impotent to escape (just as the Saga constitutes the unfolding of a curse through the intrigues of love and greed). Returning to "Ulrica", if we transpose the phrase "No había una espada entre los dos" to its original context, we must conclude that the consummation of love in Borges's reworking of the episode resulted in the narrator's death. Perhaps this is the meaning of the ambiguous words at the end of the story: "y poseí por primera y *última* vez la imagen de Ulrica" (19; my italics).

It is now time to consider the way in which the story's main theme is articulated. As we have seen, both "El Zahir" and "El Aleph" are centred on the theme of the dead woman. In both cases, this is the starting point of the narrative as well as the event that triggers the hero's subsequent actions. Both stories, furthermore,

deal with an obsession which threatens to destroy the character's mental stability. In "El Aleph", the risk of madness is mitigated by the effect of forgetfulness which eventually liberates the victim (Borges's persona) from its fatal chains. Likewise, in "El Zahir", the protagonist hopes to find some kind of alleviation from his disease, initially by consulting a psychiatrist (592), and finally by seeking oblivion through self-annihilation—Borges was actually consulting a psychoanalyst at the time (Canto 112).

"El Aleph", however, is structurally a more complex story because it mixes in its narrative a wider variety of elements. It begins with the motif of the dead woman whose memory the poet will keep alive for posterity (thus creating a parodic rendering of the *Vita nuova*), but it soon becomes an ironic comment on certain writers and cultural institutions which the author wishes to confront directly. There is no question that in the vision motif Borges makes use of Dantean imagery and rhetoric, but the initial parodic intention is eventually subsumed under the story's satirical portrayal of what is considered to be the prototype of a successful Argentine writer, Carlos Argentino Daneri.

In "El Zahir", on the other hand, Borges achieved a greater intensity by focusing the development of the narrative on the character's obsession with the coin. Apart from the initial presentation of the dead woman, everything in the story circles around this basic idea. The coin, however, is a symbol and what matters is the way in which the protagonist reacts to its influence. In this respect, the story represents a humorous reworking of an ancient theme, one which enjoys a long literary tradition, both serious and comic. I refer to the psycho-physiological condition known in medieval and renaissance treatises as *amor heroicus* (Lowes 491-546; Nardi "L'amore" 517-42; Babb 128-42). Geoffrey Chaucer, in his *Knight's Tale* describes its symptoms thus:

Whan that Arcite to Thebes comen was,
 Ful ofte a day he swelte and seyde 'Alas!
 For seen his lady shal he nevere mo.
 And shortly to concluden al his wo,
 So muche sorwe hadde nevere creature
 That is, or shal, whil that the world may dure.

His slep, his mete, his drinke, is him biraft,
 That lene he wex and drye as is a shaft;
 His eyen holwe, and grisly to biholde,
 His hewe falow and pale as asshen colde,
 And solitarie he was and evere allone,
 And waillinge al the night, makinge his mone;
 And if he herde song or instrument,
 Thanne wolde he wepe, he mighte nat be stent.
 So feble eek were his spiritz, and so lowe,
 And chaunged so, that no man koude knowe
 His speche nor his vois, though men it herde.
 And in his geere for al the world he ferde,
 Nat oonly lik the loveris maladye
 Of Hereos, but rather lyk manie,
 Engendred of humour malencolik,
 Biforen, in his celle fantastik.
 And shortly, turned was al up so doun
 Bothe habit and eek disposicioun
 Of him, this woful love daun Arcite. (lines 497-521)

The physiology of love depicted by Chaucer in these lines is typical of the medical treatises of the time, which emphasize the lovers' loss of appetite, loss of flesh, fever, and so forth. Psychologically, lovesickness is characterized by sadness, insomnia, restlessness, and an excessive thought of the beloved, to the point of forgetting the outside world:

Lovers could not be expected to act quite rationally. They might lapse suddenly into a kind of coma, totally abstracted from the world: "Many times," wrote Folquet de Marseille, "people speak to me and I don't know what they say; they greet me and I hear nothing." In the same way, Lancelot in the *Roman de la charrete* "totally forgets himself and he knows not whether he is alive or dead, forgetting even his own name" (Valency 155-56).

This condition, it was observed, leads to a state in which the lover, overwhelmed by grief and uncertainty, eventually desires his own death: "Many lovers commit suicide. Others have a gentler but no less tragic end; they waste away and die" (Babb 137). Love, then, was seen as a kind of mental alienation which could lead to self-destruction. Now Chaucer's passage is conceived in terms that

would have been familiar to his audience. In fact, the material he used for his stories was traditional and not of his own invention. The modern reader, on the other hand, is less prone to recognize the literary and medical background that lies behind it, partly because the technical language that supports it has lost its meaning (since it has been replaced by other forms of scientific representation), and partly because the cultural tradition that sustains it has, to a great extent, been forgotten or ignored: "Just as invective dies when the social occasion that countenanced it passes, so burlesque withers away when the knowledge that supports it is forgotten" (Worcester 42-43). Borges was well aware of this rupture with tradition but he nevertheless—or precisely because of it—chose to use elements not only from the classical tradition but also from world literature at large. How deeply he delved in the specific problematics of all his sources is a different matter. What is important for my argument is the fact that he was interested in and acquainted with a great variety of literary traditions—which is attested by the many essays and book reviews written during his life time—and that he often used this material for satirical purposes in his writing.

I have chosen to illustrate the theme of lovesickness with a passage from Chaucer because of Borges's keen appraisal of his language as well as his literary technique and psychological depth (see, for instance, the essay "De las alegorías a las novelas", *OC* 2: 122-24). In doing so, I am not necessarily presenting it as the only model Borges could have turned to for the writing of "El Zahir". He was, however, well-versed with *The Canterbury Tales*, and the characterization of Arcite's "maladye" in the *Knight's Tale* was therefore known to him. Of course, the theme of love permeates Chaucer's *œuvre*. Take, for instance, the opening lines of *The Book of the Duchess*, with which Borges's story shares (in a satirical key) the theme of the deceased woman and the lover's grief:

And I ne may, ne nyght ne morwe,
 Slepe, and thys melancolye
 And drede I have for to dye.
 Defaulte of slepe and hevynesse
 Hath slain my spirite of quyknese,
 That I have loste al lustyhede;

Such fantasies ben in myn hede,
So I not what is best too doo. (77-78, lines 22-29)

There is, however, another English author for whom Borges professed a great esteem, Robert Burton, and it is in the pages of this indefatigable compiler that Borges may well have found the basic inspiration for the satirical version of love melancholy in his story. There are in fact several elements, both biographic and stylistic, that bring together the two writers: both were bookish and rather solitary men who would gladly have exchanged (as they did) the world for a book; both had an unusual taste for the eccentric and unorthodox; both were fascinated with all sorts of readings but, at the same time, regretted having spent their life in seclusion; thus both felt a nostalgia for real experience, for love and life in its concrete expression. In both authors, furthermore, there is a sense of frustration and lack of achievement; and yet both ravished in endless catalogues and encyclopaedic knowledge, and somehow nurtured a view of themselves as spectators of the world. Finally, there is a perceptible irreverence in both of them towards literary history: in the case of Burton, this is due to his certitude that the writer stands above his predecessors in virtue of his privileged position at the end of a temporal string ("he that comes last is commonly best", I: 11); in Borges to his conviction that in the universal order of literary discourse past and present are relative notions because of their interaction both in the creative and interpretative process (see "Kafka y sus precursores", OC 2: 88-90). Note in the following passage the thematic as well as stylistic affinities with Borges's story:

Heroicall Love, which is proper to men and women, is a frequent cause of melancholy, and deserves much rather to be called burning lust. (...) Avicenna (...) calleth this passion *Ilishi*, and defines it to be a disease or melancholy vexation, or anguish of minde, in which a man continually meditates of the beauty, gesture, manners of his Mistris, and troubles himselfe about it. (...) For continuall cogitation is not the *genus*, but a symptome of love, wee continually thinke of that which wee hate and abhorre, as well as that which we love, and many things we covet and desire, without all hope of attaining. *Carolus à Lorme* in his questions makes a doubt (...) whether this heroicall love be a disease: *Julius Pollux Onomast* (...) determines it; They that are in love are likewise sicke. (...) *Arnoldus [Villanovanus]* will have it improperly

so called, & a malady rather of the body, then (*sic*) minde, Tully in his *Tusculanes* defines it a furious disease of the minde, Plato madnesse it selfe, *Ficinus* his *Commentator* (...) a species of madnesse, for many have runne mad for women, (...) but *Rhasis* a melancholy passion, and most Physitians make it a species, or kinde of melancholy (as will appeare by the Symptomes) and treat of it apart. (Burton III: 51, 56-57)

En aquel libro estaba declarado mi mal. Según el prólogo, el autor se propuso “reunir en un solo volumen (...) todos los documentos que se refieren a la superstición del Zahir, incluso cuatro piezas pertenecientes al archivo de Habicht y el manuscrito original del informe de Philip Meadows Taylor”. La creencia en el Zahir es islámica y data, al parecer, del siglo XVIII. (Barlach impugna los pasajes que Zotenberg atribuye a Abulfeda.) *Zahir*, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible; en tal sentido, es uno de los noventa y nueve nombres de Dios; la plebe, en tierras musulmanas, lo dice de “los seres o cosas que tienen la terrible virtud de ser inolvidables y cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente”. El primer testimonio incontrovertido es el del persa Lutf Alí Azur. En las puntuales páginas de la enciclopedia biográfica titulada *Templo del fuego*, ese polígrafo y derviche ha narrado que en un colegio de Shiraz hubo un astrolabio de cobre, “construido de tal suerte que quien lo miraba una vez *no pensaba en otra cosa* y así el rey ordenó que lo arrojaran a lo más profundo del mar, para que los hombres no se olvidaran del universo”. Más dilatado es el informe de Meadows Taylor, que sirvió al nizam de Haidarabad. (...) Taylor oyó en los arrabales de Bhuj la desacostrumbada locución “Haber visto al Tigre” (...) para significar la *locura* o la santidad. (593; my italics)

The book to which Borges refers at the beginning of the quote is of course apocryphal, but the allusion to an all-inclusive treatise dealing with the narrator's disease (“En aquel libro estaba declarado mi mal”) could well be Burton's study of love melancholy, with its obsessive concern with creating a total inventory of the subject. In this respect, Borges's own narrative pattern seems to owe a great deal to Burton's technique of amplification through enumeration. Comparing the two texts, furthermore, one cannot fail to notice the presence of common key elements in their description: emphasis on vision, excessive meditation, and madness.

On the other hand, Daniel Balderston observes that Borges's passage on the fictitious Persian writer Lutf Alí Azur echoes an episode in R. L. Stevenson's "The Rajah's Diamond" (159-60). This coincidence shows how Borges effectively combined a great variety of sources but it does not invalidate my argument, which rests on the identification of the Zahir with an erotic fixation. Once Borges had elaborated this basic pattern, he was free to include (or invent) as many allusions as he may have wished. Indeed, a recent article on the manuscript of "El Aleph" shows that Burton's *Anatomy* was among Borges intended sources for that story and, on the basis of the evidence, it can safely be assumed its influence in "El Zahir" as well (Del Río Parra 30-32).

It is not difficult to see why Borges enjoyed so much the reading of Burton, whose fine prose is indeed celebrated as being quite unique in English literature. Above all, I think, it is his extraordinary sense of humour and irony that render his writing so fascinating and entertaining. Ovid nods compared to this witty Elizabethan bachelor:

Every Lover admires his mistris, though she bee very deformed of her selfe, ill favored, wrinkled, pimpled, pale, red, yellow, tan'd, tallow-faced, have a swolne Junglers platter face, or a thin, leane, chitty face, have clouds in her face, be crooked, dry, bald, gogle-eied, bleare-eyed, or with staring eyes, she lookes like a squis'd Cat, hold her head still awry, heavy, dull, hollow-eyed, blacke or yellow about the eyes, or squint-eyed, sparrow mouthed, *Persean* hooke nosed, have a sharpe fox nose, a redde nose, *China* flat, great nose, *nare simo patuloque*, a nose like a promontory, gubber-tushed, rotten teeth, black, uneven, browne teeth, beetle browed, a Witches beard, her breath stinke all over the roome, her nose drop winter and summer, with a *Bavarian* poke under her chin, a sharpe chin, lave eared, with a long cranes necke, which stands awry too ... [etc., the complete passage takes up a whole page!] (164)

Let us leave aside the Ovidian theme of the lover's vituperation as a cure for lovesickness and concentrate first on the malady itself. We have already seen how, in the poem "El amenazado", Borges describes his experience of love as a paralysing physical and mental disease ("como en un sueño atroz"; "La ansiedad"; "el horror de vivir en lo sucesivo"; "Ya los ejércitos me cercan, las hordas"; "Me duele una

mujer en todo el cuerpo"). In "El Zahir", on the other hand, Borges refers to physical pain twice, and this insistence on pathology does convey the impression that the narrator wants to get rid of something which effectively tortures him. In the first instance, the allusion to suffering is coupled with the name of the dead woman ("la desdeñosa imagen de Teodelina, el dolor físico"); whilst the second reference suggests the complete suppression of pain together with the destruction of the character's self ("Tanto valdría mantener que es terrible el dolor de un anesthesiado a quien le abren el cráneo", 594-95), which the author disguises in the form of a mystical revelation. Other allusions in the story to the traditional symptoms of lovesickness mentioned above include the following: "un principio de fiebre" (590), "Insomne, poseído, casi feliz", "demoníaco influjo", "tenaces cavilaciones", "la moneda que tanto me inquietaba", "quería alejarme de su órbita" (591), "tomé una pastilla de veronal y dormí tranquilo", "olvidar la moneda", "procuré pensar en otra moneda, pero no pude", "no logré cambiar de idea fija" (592), "opté por consultar a un psiquiatra. (...) Le dije que el insomnio me atormentaba" (592-93), "todos continuaron pensando en él, hasta el fin de sus días" (593), "Cómo las postrará a las enfermeras que le dan de comer en la boca", "Tendrán que alimentarme y vestirme", "no sabré quién fue Borges", "Otros soñarán que estoy loco y yo con el Zahir", "Cuando todos los hombres de la tierra piensen, día y noche, en el Zahir", "En las horas desiertas de la noche aun puedo caminar por las calle" (595).

The theme of love has an important literary antecedent in an astonishing and influential treatise composed in northern France at the end of the twelfth century: the *De amore* by Andreas Capellanus. Capellanus defines love as an immoderate passion which takes control of the lover's mind. Such condition results from an excessive cogitation on the physical qualities of the other sex. The basic requirement for the arousal of desire, however, is vision. Only through the sense of sight is physical beauty perceived, and only through this initial contact can love cling to the lover's heart. The idea is a literary commonplace but Andreas is so firmly set on it that he even disputes the possibility that the blind can experience love: "Blindness is a bar to love, because a blind man cannot see anything

upon which his mind can reflect immoderately, and so love cannot arise in him" (33). This emphasis on vision is crucial for the appreciation of Borges's erotomaniac allusions in the story. It is implicit, as we have seen, in the image of the veil ("la rasgadura del Velo"), as much as it determines the narrator's fixation with the coin he is unable to forget: "lo miré un instante; salí a la calle, tal vez con un principio de fiebre" (590). Also, whilst the word *zahir* frankly discloses the visual connotations of the story ("Zahir, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible"), the insistence on Teodelina's physical appearance together with her public "theophanies" ("se mostraba en lugares ortodoxos", 589) help to reinforce the traditional link between love and sight which is at work in the story (Babb 132; Nardi *Dante* 111; for the derivation of the word *eros* from vision see Burton III: 66).

Borges's mention of a psychiatrist, and the later reference to madness, confirm the character's syndrome. In medieval literature love melancholy was frequently described as an illness that could affect the lover's sense of personality, thus forgetting himself as well as the world that surrounds him (such as Chaucer's depiction of Arcite in lines 511-18 cited above). The irony of the situation in Borges's story, however, consists in the implicit bourgeois attitude of the character (Borges's satirical persona), for the truth of the matter is that psychoanalysis, as a therapeutical treatment, has inadvertently created its own social type, precisely in the same way as love melancholy, in medieval and renaissance poetry, was seen primarily as a 'noble' disease suited to the refined sensibility of the aristocracy. Burton states it thus:

Heroicall or love melancholy [is causeth by] this comeliness and beauty which proceeds from women. The part affected in men is the liver, and therefore called *Heroicall*, because commonly Gallants, Noblemen and the most generous spirits are possessed with it. (III:39)

As Maurice Valency puts it: "Love was the occupational disease of the leisure class" (154). In this respect Borges's mention of a decadent sentimentalism in Argentina ("¿Confesaré que, movido por la más sincera de las pasiones argentinas, el esnobismo, yo estaba enamorado de ella y que su muerte me afectó hasta las lágrimas?"),

590), ridicules a society which emulates not only the latest Parisian fashion but also the hollow *ethos* of a foreign bourgeoisie.

The idea of love as a human disposition which brings joy and sorrow is, of course, a universal theme. Yet it is probably true that no other literature in Western history has been so engaged in its artistic and philosophical representation as the one that flourished in the courts of France and Italy during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Now it was the merit of the so-called *stilnovisti* to introduce some fundamental changes to the conception of 'courtly love' poetry. One of these consisted in the poet's radical introspection in an attempt to define the very process of love. The master of this new type of poetry was Guido Cavalcanti, in whose hands love poetry became a kind of psychology of the erotic emotion. In him the object of poetic contemplation is not so much the lady as the genesis and manifestation of her effects in the lover's subjectivity. Although there are moments of intense, though ineffable fascination with the transcendental essence of the beloved, Cavalcanti's poetry is seldom joyful or ecstatic in the way in which Dante, or Guinizzelli before him, celebrated the beauty of the angelic woman.

Far from achieving the heights of mystical devotion achieved by Dante in the *Vita nuova*, Cavalcanti endeavoured to represent the psychological turmoil of the process of love. His greatest philosophical achievement is the *canzone* "Donna me prega" (*Poeti* II). Love, he argues, arises from the sight of a corporeal shape ("veduta forma", line 21) which, after being impressed in the memory and the imagination, is apprehended by the possible intellect. Since the possible intellect—being exclusively concerned with universals—is divorced from the passions of the sensitive soul, it follows that love cannot take hold in it (lines 24-28). Love, therefore, is a passion of the sensitive soul only and, as such, it exerts a jurisdiction that is independent from the dominion of the intellect. Sensual love, nevertheless, can become an irrational potency capable of controlling or misdirecting the intellectual faculties (lines 29-34). For Cavalcanti, this overpowering effect of love is due to its celestial origin, the heaven of Mars, which exerts a malign and obscure influence upon

the sensitive soul (lines 17-18).¹ Now the aspect that interests me most in connection with Borges's short story is given in the poem's central stanza, where Cavalcanti makes reference to the compelling vigour of sensual love. This, he says, can result in 'death' (in a metaphorical sense, that is, as the extinction of moral virtue) when it substitutes in man the commanding force of reason. The underlying notion is that love can subjugate the righteousness of practical reason and cancel the freedom of the will:

Di sua potenza segue spesso morte,
 se forte - la virtù fosse impedita,
 la quale aita - la contraria via:
 non perché oppost' a naturale sia;
 ma quanto che da buon perfetto tort'è
 per sorte, - non pò dire om ch'aggia vita,
 ché stabilita - non ha signoria.
 A simil pò valer quand' om l'oblia. (lines 35-42)

I have already referred to the inevitability of sensual love and its bearing on Borges's early poetry. The idea, of course, is traditional, and it was used not only as a figurative means to express the psychological intensity of the erotic drive as it takes possession of the lover's 'heart' (an image that constitutes a literary commonplace among the poets of the *Duecento*), but also literally as the suspension of the body's vital impulses. We have seen how lovesickness was considered to be a condition that could bring disastrous consequences to the sufferer, and it was from this perspective that the question was examined by medieval doctors. Naturally, apart from describing the symptoms of passionate love and its physiology, they aimed to discover a remedy for the affliction. In this respect, the general consent was that the cure of the malady could be obtained by occupying the mind in a purposeful activity; this, in turn, would bring about oblivion thus restoring the patient's health (Nardi "L'amore" 517-42; Burton, in *Anatomy III*, provides a comprehensive view).

¹ For the philosophical background, see Bird; J. E. Shaw; Nardi *Dante* 1-152.

This is how Dino del Garbo, a Florentine physician active during the first decades of the thirteenth century, interpreted Cavalcanti's reference to death and forgetfulness in lines 35 and 42 of the *Canzone d'amore*. In his extensive commentary on the poem, Dino says:

For this passion can alter the body so much that it often causes death which is the most terrible of things. But the way love causes death is stated by Guido in, *se forte la vertu fosse impedita*, by which he means that love kills when it is so vehement that it impedes the work of the vegetative or vital virtues of the soul, which conserve life and its operation in the human body. (...) We see that love often produces this effect, namely that of causing the death of the person who vehemently perseveres in it. We also note that he who can forget his love can return to his natural disposition, whence the doctors of medicine say that the best cure of this passion is to distract the man from thinking about his beloved so that he will forget it. (I quote from Bird's translation, "The Canzone" 123-27).

We do not need to concern ourselves with the accuracy of Dino's interpretation. The fact is that in highlighting the beneficial role of forgetfulness in the cure of the malady he was following a common belief among the medical doctors of his time (Nardi *Dante* 121-22; *Poeti* II: 526). The point that interests me most, however, is the striking coincidence with Borges's mention of forgetfulness in relation to its curative power both in "El Zahir" and in "El Aleph". In the latter story, after the initial shock of total vision—an experience which threatens to destroy the protagonist's mental balance—he declares: "Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido" (OC 1: 626). Here Borges refers to the salutary effects of oblivion in relation to the character's overwhelming encounter with the Aleph, but at the end of the story he comes back to the idea specifically in connection with his obsession with Beatriz: "Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz" (628)²

² Note the ambiguity of the utterance: as a non-fictional authorial statement, the phrase constitutes a conscious remark ("yo mismo") on the poetics of the composition, that is, it discloses the mechanism of a creative procedure that is based on the partial rewriting of a literary model. Hence the terms "falseando" and "perdiendo" are not

There is no question, then, that in "El Aleph" time and oblivion exercise a favourable outcome in the cure of the narrator's affective fixation. In "El Zahir", on the other hand, the interaction between memory and forgetfulness becomes the dynamic centre of the story. Just as memory epitomizes the lover's obsession with the beloved, oblivion represents its possible cure:

Hasta fines de junio me *distrajo* la tarea de componer un relato fantástico. (...) La ejecución de esa fruslería (...) me permitió *olvidar* la moneda. Noches hubo en que me creí tan seguro de poder olvidarla que voluntariamente la recordaba. (592; my italics)

Note that Borges introduces here a third element, namely, occupation ("me distrajo la tarea"), thus reinforcing the link between the story's underlying motif and its therapeutic treatment as prescribed by ancient and medieval doctors (see, for instance, Ovid, *Remedia Amoris*, lines 135-44). Now the expression "me distrajo" calls to mind the passage from Dino's commentary where the same word is used: "Et propterea medici ponunt quod maxima cura istius passionis, scilicet, amoris est ut homo *distrahitur* a cogitatione illius quod amat, et *obliviscatur* eius" (Bird 168; my italics). Burton also refers to the occupation of the mind as one of the best treatments for lovesickness: "Labour, slender and sparing diet, with continuall busnesse, are the best & most ordinary meanes to prevent it" (III: 202). Furthermore, in the Second Partition—dealing with the cures for melancholy—he cites Rhasis, one of the leading medical authorities in the Middle Ages, in a statement that reproduces Dino's advice: "And for this disease in particular, *there can be no better cure, then continuall busnesse*, as Rhasis holds, *to have some employment or other, which may set their minde aworke, and distract their cogitations*" (II: 68). Borges's choice of word, then, must be an allusion to Burton, for there is no evidence that he had a direct knowledge of the Latin source. Indeed his annotations in the manuscript of "El Aleph" reveal that he had in mind this particular section of the *Anatomy* in the preparation of the short story (Del Río Parra 31). But this is a question of sources and does not invalidate the argument as a whole.

simply an indication of a psychological process related to the fragility of memory, but also the fundamental principles that make up the story's narrative technique.

What is important is to recognize his playful rewriting of a traditional literary theme.

In fact, this is already present in "El club de los mendigos", a tale published in *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados* in 1933. There are elements in this story that indicate Borges's familiarity with the medieval love romance (the motif of the beggar, for instance, is reminiscent of Bérout's version of the legend of Tristan and Iseult, one of the most renowned love romances of the Middle Ages), as well as with the phenomenology of love in courtly lyrics. Burton's depiction of love madness and its cure is also manifest. Note also the motif of sight and, especially, the greeting, which suggests an imitation of Dantean and Cavalcantian lyrics.

Returning to "El Zahir", although I have found no confirmation of Borges's acquaintance with Cavalcanti's *Canzone d'amore*, it is a fact that the story belongs to a period in which the author declared to have been immersed in Dante scholarship, and he must therefore have had an idea of the complexities of the issue of love in Dante's contemporaries. The fact that he did not develop such questions in his essays does reveal the nature of his interest in Dante, which is rather fragmentary and eccentric.

As I have already suggested, the main key for the appreciation of the Dantean element in the story lies in its parodic inversion. As in "El Aleph", Borges makes use here of several motifs and expressions that he borrows directly from the Italian poet and turns them into mockery. In the writing of "El Zahir", he actually weaved phrases and expressions from the *Vita nuova* and also inserted a few allusions to the *Commedia*. Particularly obvious is the motif of the dead woman, Teodelina Villar, who, like Beatriz Viterbo, stands as the antithesis of the Florentine counterpart. There is also an implicit identification between the character (Borges's persona) and the poetic 'I' in Dante's work. Of course, Borges is not alone in parodying Dante, whose mystical and moralising attitude was subject to derision in his own day (notably in the poetry of Cecco Angiolieri). Although there are strong satirical elements in the story, as far as the theme of love is concerned Borges's appraisal is entirely dominated by a projection of his superstitious emotions, Beatrice being for him the epitome of the ungrateful beloved who refuses to condescend to

the lover's request. Thus he found in caricature the best way of dealing with a problem that, in his view, had affected Dante as much as it overwhelmed his own existence; consider the following statements: "Dante profesó por Beatriz una adoración idolátrica (...) un amor *desdichado y supersticioso*' (OC 3: 371; "En aquel libro estaba declarado *mi mal* (...) la *superstición* del Zahir' (OC 1: 593; my italics).

In this respect, Estela Canto relates a significant anecdote in her relationship with the author. According to her, it was during a walk in the summer of 1945 that Borges asked her to marry him. That evening he recited verses from various poets, especially Dante. More specifically, she recalls how Borges made fun of Beatrice as she exhorts Virgil to go in aid of the bewildered pilgrim (*Inf.* II, 58-74), assuring him of her most devoted praises back in heaven:

Recitaba versos —la tirada de Beatrice cuando ruega a Virgilio que acompañe a Dante en su viaje a través del infierno.(...) Y hacía comentarios burlones sobre Beatrice, que adula a Virgilio para lograr sus propósitos. (97)

In this way Borges was preparing the lyrical ground for his petition. But there is a double edge to it. On the one hand, by invoking the initial setting of the *Commedia* he may have appealed for his beloved's 'grace' (thus creating a parallel between him and the pilgrim); but on the other he was anticipating his failure, not only through his cynical portrayal of Beatrice but also because for him Dante's love for Beatrice was in essence a symbol of unrequited love, a circumstance that he was implicitly re-enacting at that moment.

I have already alluded to Borges's pun in the name of the story's dead heroine, Teodelina Villar. In fact, her original Christian name—as it was published in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* in 1947—was Clementina, a choice which is equally ironical (derived from the Latin *clemens*, it implies mercy and clemency). More specifically, it is a literary reference to the lady's refusal in 'courtly love' poetry and, therefore, it hints at the inherent cruelty of love (this is Borges's comical use of the principle *Nomina sunt consequentia rerum*, a common gloss on medieval civil law employed by Dante in the *Vita nuova*). Teodelina, on the other hand, prompts more complex associations. Deriving from the Greek *thea* (goddess), it makes reference both to the religion of love created by the troubadours as well as to

the woman-angel motif to which the *stilnovisti* were so much devoted. The second half, however, reinforces the story's theme of love-madness, since it suggests the Latin terms *delirium* (folly, silliness; hence *stultitia*, "estolidez", an expression used by Borges in his sardonic description of the woman), and *dementia* (insanity). Again, with regard to her surname Borges's handling of the art of vituperation is evident. From the Latin *vilis*, Villar indicates something cheap or worthless, while it also transmits the idea of moral degradation implicit in its Spanish equivalent (note his use of the word in the poem "Carnicería": "Más vil que un lupanar" (OC 1: 31). In short, Borges's choice of name entails a burlesque treatment of the cult of the beloved in troubadour and stilnovistic poetry. However, there is also an element of self-mockery in it, for this is the way in which the author himself mystified the object of love. As Estela Canto declares: "Borges se acercaba a las mujeres como si fueran diosas" (81).

In the *Vita nuova*, Dante makes use of various devices in order to construct a transcendental account of his lady. Etymology is one of them. Thus by establishing a correspondence between her name and her effects he distinguishes her singularity precisely as a *beatrice*, that is, as a carrier of beatitude and salvation (*Vita* II, 1; compare II, 6; V, 1). Also, because of her miraculous curative powers, Beatrice is called "donna de la salute" (III, 4; compare XXVI, 4), a term which contrasts sharply not only with the malignant influence exerted by the coin in Borges's story but also with the idea of insanity conveyed in Teodelina's name. Note, in addition, the reversal of Beatrice's supreme moral quality, humility. Recalling her first appearance in the streets of her city, Dante says: "Apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto, sanguigno, cinta e ornata a la guisa che a la sua giovanissima etade si convenia" (II, 3). Indeed, the most famous sonnet of the *Vita nuova*, "Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare" (XXVI, 7), transcends the individuality of the poet's voice in order to become a choral affirmation in praise of the lady's angelical essence:

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.

Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira,

che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova. (lines 5-11)

In contrast, Teodelina emerges as a hateful, frivolous and silly woman. If anything, her public manifestations ("se mostraba") could only reinforce her lack of moral and intellectual virtue:

Teodelina Villar se mostraba en lugares ortodoxos. (...) Su vida era ejemplar y, sin embargo, la roía sin tregua una desesperación interior. Ensayaba continuas metamorfosis, como para huir de sí misma. (...) En alguna etapa de la confusa noche del seis, Teodelina Villar fue mágicamente la que fue hace veinte años; sus rasgos recobraron la autoridad que dan la soberbia, el dinero, la juventud, la conciencia de coronar una jerarquía, la falta de imaginación, las limitaciones, la estolidez. (589-90)

Of course, Dante's early lyrics reflect the literary conventions of his time. As I have already mentioned, one of the dominant motifs is the idea of love as an irresistible passion which takes control of the lover. In chapter II, for instance, at the sight of Beatrice he exclaims: "Ecce *deus* fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi". And yet the emerging passion of his soul is far from becoming the sensual emotion of the troubadours or the compelling force of Cavalcanti, who could write: "Ché solo Amor mi sforza, contra cui non val forza — né misura" (*Poeti* II: 492, lines 43-44). Indeed the devastation caused by the lady's proximity is a frequent theme of the *stilnovisti*. One of its effects is the lover's tremor, to which Dante refers both in the *Vita nuova* as well as at the crucial reunion with Beatrice in *Purgatorio* XXX, 32-48. Borges was very keen on the latter episode, and his essays on Dante show that he paid close attention to the corresponding incidents in the *Vita nuova* ("el amor que tantas veces lo había traspasado en Florencia", *OC* 3: 369).

The characteristic mark of the *Vita nuova*, however, is the theme of mortality. The death of Beatrice constitutes the central event of the composition, not only with regard to her beatific ascension to heaven (XXVIII, 1), but also in relation to the consequent desolation of the city and its inhabitants. In this respect, Borges inserts in the story a few parodic references to the events that follow Beatrice's death. Thus the first feature to notice about Teodelina is precisely her contempt for death: "Teodelina Villar *cometió el solecismo* de

morir en pleno Barrio Sur”, which I read as a deliberate pun on the English ‘committed suicide’, a rendering that would surely have been applauded by Xul Solar, Borges's eccentric friend and contriver of new linguistic forms. This idea is reiterated in the next paragraph with the phrase: “Rígida entre las flores la dejé, perfeccionando su desdén por la muerte” (590), implying that she did not care to take her own life. (This interpretation does not preclude the possibility of murder. Indeed, in his study of “El Aleph”, Daniel Devoto has traced the expression “who may have committed such a solecism”, in Rudyard Kipling's *The Phantom Rickshaw* (283 n. 2). The phrase in Kipling's narrative links the passage with an incident that recurs obsessively in the story: “I'm sure it's all a mistake — a hideous mistake; and we'll be good friends again some day” (*Phantom* 7). In addition, the end of Kipling's story supports a psychological reading of “El Zahir” in which the heroine's death accounts for the author's need to liberate himself from his haunting obsessions:

Pity me, at least on the score of my ‘delusion,’ for I know you will never believe what I have written here. Yet as surely as ever a man was done to death by the Powers of Darkness I am that man. In Justice, too, pity her. For as surely as ever woman was killed by man, *I killed Mrs. Wessington*. And the last portion of my punishment is even now upon me (39-40; my italics).

Note how the deeper emotional meaning of the allusion (Borges's symbolical destruction of the love object) is disguised under the apparent playfulness of the new context, a further example of the way in which parody and satire conceal in Borges a deeper psychological motive.

Now Teodelina's death, in Borges's rewriting of the *Vita nuova*, also constitutes the dividing line of the narrative. It is after her death that the catastrophic events in the protagonist's life take place, recalling the apocalyptic phenomena accompanying Beatrice's death as it was foreseen by Dante in a dream-vision (XXIII).

I have so far considered the thematic elements of the story from a general perspective. However, in order to give a specific account of the Dantean elements Borges weaved in the texture of the story, I will now adopt a schematic procedure. This will allow me to identify the allusions to Dante with more precision and also to make a

brief textual commentary where applicable. The following list includes words and expressions borrowed from the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia*.

(1) Allusions to Dante in the characterization of the dead heroine:

"*Se mostraba en lugares ortodoxos*" (589): "Io dico ch'ella si mostrava sì gentile" (XXVI, 3); "Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira" (XXVI, 7, line 9); "Là ove tante donne mostravano le loro bellezze" (XIV, 2); "Lo die che Beatrice si mosterrà" (XXIV, 4). Consider also Dante's extensive use of the verb "apparve" in *Vita* II-III. Generally, a reference to the lady's epiphany, a commonplace in the poetry of the *stilnovisti*.

Su vida era *ejemplar* (589): "Per essempro di lei bieltà si prova" (XIX, 11, line 50), Dante's most famous *canzone* in the *Vita nuova*. Cf. *Convivio*. III, xv, 13. Generally, a reference to the lady's moral goodness as praised by the *stilnovisti*.

"*La desdeñosa imagen de Teodelina*" (594): "E avvegna che la sua imagine, la quale continuatamente meco stava, fosse baldanza d'Amore a segnoreggiare me, tuttavia era di sì nobilissima virtù" (II, 9). "E pareami che la sua faccia avesse tanto aspetto d'umiltade, che pareo che dicesse: 'Io sono a vedere lo principio de la pace'". (XXIII, 8). Consider also Dante's reference to the semblance of Christ: "Quella imagine benedetta" (XL, 1), and *Paradiso* XXXI 104, 108 ("la Veronica", "la sembianza vostra": the true image of Christ). In *El hacedor* Borges included a prose poem on this motif:

Perdimos esos rasgos, (...) como se pierde para siempre una imagen en el calidoscopio. (...) El perfil de un judío en el subterráneo es tal vez el de Cristo; las manos que nos dan unas monedas en una ventanilla tal vez repiten las que unos soldados, un día, clavaron en la cruz" ("*Paradiso, XXXI, 108*"; OC 2: 178).

Note the contrast between the divine and the profane ("el subterráneo", "unas monedas", "una ventanilla"). In "El Zahir" this antithesis is implicit in the final expression ("quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios"), which is the reverse of the opening phrase ("el Zahir es una moneda común"). There is a pun of words here on the idea of a coin as a common object, on the one hand, and the true semblance of God, on the other. The Greek word for semblance is *eikon* (a likeness, image, or portrait), as Attilio Momigliano—Borges's favourite

commentator—indicates (830); but the term “común” recalls the word *koine*, which is dative feminine of *koinos*, the Greek term for ‘common’, or ‘shared in common’. There is a clear sound echo here (*koine-eikon*), very similar to the kind of word games exploited by the troubadours and the *stilnovisti* (such as “Eva-Ave” and “amor-morte”). Borges was Greekless, but these two terms must have been known to him given their importance both in biblical language and religious art. In addition, the implicit allusion to Christ's semblance links the story's last sentence with the final vision of the *Commedia* where Dante designs a poetic representation of the mystery of the Incarnation:

Quella circolazion che sì concetta
pareva in te come lume riflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo. (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 127-32)

Note also the echo of line 131 in Borges's pun: “aunque no todas las efigies” (589). Borges must have been very sensitive to the fact that the pilgrim's final vision is a contemplation of a human face (“la nostra effige”), thus creating a striking parallel with the culmination of the allegorical quest in Attar's *The Conference of Birds* (see Borges's essay “El Simurgh y el águila”, *OC* 3: 366-68; for a brief consideration of the final identity between the wayfarer and the divinity in Borges, see Barrenechea 66-67).

“La roía sin tregua” (589): “Che frutti infamia al traditor ch'í'rodo” (*Inferno* XXXIII, 8), one of Borges's favourite episodes of the *Commedia*. A similar parodic allusion to the episode is found in the short story *La hermana de Eloísa* (in collaboration with Luisa Mercedes Levinson): “En la estación, el hambre pudo más, y me invité a una *milanesa a caballo y dos medios litros*” (64; my italics); compare *Inferno* XXXIII, 75: “poscia, più che'l dolor, poté'l digiuno”; XXXII, 125-26: “ch'io vidi due ghiacciati in una buca, | sì che l'un capo all'altro era *cappello*”; note Borges's pun on “cappello” (which he transforms into “caballo”), as well as the numerical reference. Compare the short story “La espera”:

[Villari] no juzgó inverosímiles o excesivas las penas infernales y no pensó que Dante lo hubiera condenado al último círculo, donde los dientes de Ugolino *roen sin fin* la nuca de Ruggieri. (OC 1: 610; my italics).

"La *sonrisa*, la *tez*, el sesgo de los *ojos*" (590): "Per grazia fa noi grazia che disvele | a lui la bocca tua, sì che discerna | la seconda bellezza che tu cele" (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 136-38); "Così lo santo riso | a sé traéli con l'antica rete!" (XXXII, 5-6); compare *Vita* XIX, 11-12: "Color di perle ha quasi", "De li occhi suoi, come ch'ella li mova, | escono spiriti d'amore" (lines 47, 51-52); XXI, 8: "Lo suo mirabile riso". In Dante and the *stilnovisti* the lady's eyes and smile are a reference to her spiritual beauty. As is well known, the motif is also present in "El Aleph": "Beatriz (...) sonriendo" (617). See also "La última sonrisa de Beatriz", OC 3: 372-74; *La hermana* 53-54, 65.

"La que fue *hace veinte años*" (590): "L'alta virtù che già m'avea trafitto | prima ch'io fuor di püerizia fosse" (*Purgatorio* XXX, 41- 42); a reference to Dante's first encounter with Beatrice at the age of nine (*Vita* II-III). Compare *La hermana* 51-52, 57.

"Sus rasgos recobraron la *autoridad*" (590): a reference to Beatrice's rebuke in cantos XXX-XXXI of the *Purgatorio*, an episode highlighted by Borges in one of his essays. Compare *La hermana de Eloísa*: "Cuando se quitó el sombrero, que era de color *verde* oscuro, como los zapatos y el traje, me fué dado valorar *su severa belleza*, quizá menos notable por la gracia que por la *autoridad*" (70; my italics). In her first appearance to Dante in the mountain of Purgatory, Beatrice wears a green mantle and an olive crown: "sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva | donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto" (*Purgatorio* XXX, 31-32).

(2) Other allusions to Dante embedded in the narrative:

"Aún me es dado *recordar*, y acaso *referir*, lo ocurrido" (589): "E vidi cose che ridire | né sa né può chi di là sù discende" (*Paradiso* I, 5-6); "Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio | che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede, e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio" (XXXIII, 55-57); compare *Convivio* III, iv, 4, 9; "Epistle to Cangrande", §29. The ineffability topos is a common feature in the two other stories which most clearly allude to Dantean themes, namely "El Aleph" (624) and "La escritura del dios" (OC 1: 598).

“Su muerte me afectó hasta las *lágrimas*” (590): “Allora cominciai a piangere molto pietosamente; e non solamente piangea ne la imaginazione, ma piangea con li occhi, bagnandoli di vere lagrime” (*Vita* XXIII, 6); compare *Vita* XXX-XXXI.

“Ebrio de una *piedad* casi impersonal” (590): the *Vita nuova* abounds in references to pity; see, in particular, XXXI-XXXVIII. Consider also *Inferno* V, lines 72, 93, 140-41. See Borges’s essay “El verdugo piadoso”, *OC* 3: 357-59.

“Las calles y las plazas *desiertas*” (591): “*Quomodo sedet sola civitas*” (*Vita* XXVIII, 1); “In questa desolata cittade” (XXX, 1). A reference to the citizens’ affective devastation following Beatrice’s death.

“Había errado en *círculo*” (591): “Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferente partes; tu autem non sic”, (*Vita* XII, 4; compare *Convivio* IV, xvi, 7-8). Whilst in the *Vita nuova* Dante uses the image of the circle to convey the idea of perfect love, in a later poem he propounds the Cavalcantian view of carnal love as a passion which subjects the practical reason to the thrust of sensual desire: “Però nel cerchio de la sua palestra | liber arbitrio già mai non fu franco, | sí che consiglio invan vi si balestra” (*Rime* Sonnet CXI 195, lines 9-11; on the defeating power of passionate love, see *Canzone* CXVI, in *Poeti, Rime* 207-10). In “El Zahir”, on the other hand, Borges uses the image to express the idea of fatality, which we can enunciate thus: just as the perfection of the circle is determined *a priori* by rational principles, so life is tied by necessity to the gravitational point around which it must constantly rotate. Note that the “almacén” where the protagonist obtains the Zahir lies at the centre of the movement. In this respect, Estela Canto points out: “Yo vivía entonces en la esquina de Chile y Tacuarí, y es en un bar de Chile y Tacuarí donde le dan la fantástica moneda” (192). It is also in an “almacén” where the hero of the short story “El Sur” is compelled to meet his death in a knife-fight. The sense of inescapable futility that permeates this passage must be seen within Borges’s deterministic conception of human action (on this issue, see Paoli, *Tre saggi* 151-66). Consider also, with wider implications for our interpretation of the story, Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophical observation on sexuality as the fundamental driving force of the will (II: 510-16), a

remark which, significantly, is mentioned by Borges in *El idioma de los argentinos* (80-81).

"Me dirigí al oeste y al sur" (591): "Giunti all'occidente" (*Inferno* XXVI, 113); "Sempre acquistando dal lato mancin" (XXVI, 126); a reference to Ulysses's tragic journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The episode was Borges's favourite (see "La Divina Comedia", OC 3: 217). In his commentary, Momigliano observes: "*Progredendo sempre verso sud-ovest*" (201). The protagonist's labyrinthine trajectory at this point in Borges's story evokes the motif of descent into hell ("Fui, en subterráneo, a Constitución y de Constitución a San Juan y Boedo. Bajé, impensadamente, en Urquiza; me dirigí al oeste y al sur; barajé, con desorden estudioso, unas cuantas esquinas y en una calle que me pareció igual a todas (...)" (591-92; my italics. Compare "La Divina Comedia", OC 3: 219). The link between Ulysses's journey and the idea of the labyrinth is not gratuitous. Indeed in his essay on the Ulysses episode, Borges notes that the word "folle" used by Dante to qualify Ulysses's enterprise (*Inferno* XXVI, 125), echoes the pilgrim's apprehension at the beginning of the journey: "El adjetivo es aplicado por Dante, en la selva oscura, a la tremenda invitación de Virgilio (*temo che la venuta non sia folle*) [;] su repetición es deliberada" ("El último viaje de Ulises", OC 3: 355). The reference to the dark forest is implicitly an allusion to the labyrinthine and perilous ways of human life, just as in "El Zahir" the city becomes a symbol for the circuitous structure of the protagonist's conflict: "Había errado en círculo" (591). Note here the pun on the word "errado", meaning both 'to roam about' and also 'to err'. Now this is precisely the point raised by Borges in his interpretation of the Dantean passage, where he argues:

Dante (...) habría simbolizado en tales pasajes un conflicto mental; yo sugiero que también lo simbolizó (...) en la trágica fábula de Ulises, y que a esa carga emocional ésta debe su tremenda virtud. Dante fue Ulises y de algún modo pudo temer el castigo de Ulises. (356; my italics. Compare Momigliano 196)

The identification between Dante and Ulysses is crucial for the understanding of Borges's allusion in the short story because it suggests a more complex correspondence, that between the character (Borges's persona) and the Dante-Ulysses model. In other instances,

the appropriation of a Dantean term or situation seems to entail a simpler analogy (Beatrice-Teodelina or Dante-Borges), but here the parallel is ambiguous, for both Dante (the pilgrim) and Ulysses carried out a journey beyond the human limits. Only one of them was able to fulfil his aim. Similarly, in writing the story Borges may have wondered whether he would be able to overcome his fears and reach fulfilment (“la peregrinación de Dante, que lleva a la visión beatífica”), or whether he would perish in the intent (“la sacrilega aventura de Ulises, que desemboca en el Infierno”, 355). At the same time, within the context of “El Zahir”, Ulysses's transgression and its consequent punishment is reminiscent of Sigurd's obligation to maintain his oath of chastity. This implicit parallel reinforces the bond between sex and death noted above. Just as man (in the figure of Ulysses) is compelled to accept the limits of knowledge and action (“divenir del mondo esperto, | e de li vizi umani e del valore”, *Inferno* XXVI, 98-99), so Borges seems to be intimidated by the catastrophic possibilities of trespassing the boundaries of the forbidden: “El hombre siempre es artífice de su propia desdicha, como el Ulises del canto XXVI del Infierno” (OC 1: 168). Courage is the key term here: “La palabra *hombre*, en todas las lenguas que sé, connota capacidad sexual y capacidad belicosa, y la palabra *virtus*, que en latín quiere decir coraje, procede de *vir*, que es varón” (OC 1: 160).

In view of the latter assertion, one only needs to tie up a few loose ends to realize the enormous sexual import hidden in such a seemingly unrelated story as “La otra muerte”, where an apparent obsession with human bravery (“capacidad belicosa”) is actually concealing a preoccupation with sexual impotence (“capacidad sexual”). Note the play on words between Damiani's epistle on God's *omnipotence* and the character's lack of courage, that is, his virtual *impotence*: to deny God's absolute power on the basis of logical reasoning, argues Damiani, is to assert his actual ‘impotence’: “Divina virtus in temporum quibusque momentis impotens ostendatur” (*De divina omnipotentia*, Migne PL vol. 145 col. 603 par. 621D), a fine example of the metaphors of the unconscious that characterizes the way in which the sexual issue manifests itself in Borges (I am of course deliberately misreading Damiani's statement).

The link between Damiani's epistle and Borges's sexual nuance in "La otra muerte" has been noted by Evelyn Fishburn, who observes:

The argument springs from a statement by St. Jerome that virginity cannot be restored once lost through intercourse, an opinion Damiani refutes maintaining that God can make a woman a virgin again if she so dedicates herself to the spiritual life as to wipe out the *memory* of her previous actions.(...) The reward for pursuing the reference to its origin is to find a playful link between the desirability of heroic machismo and virginity ("Hidden Pleasures" 57).³

I think, however, that it is possible to explore the sexual component of the allusion in its deeper psychological implication. This is not to deny the actual burden that male chauvinism may have meant to Borges. Nevertheless, if he intended a comment of this kind it is not clear why he would have chosen such an obscure and oblique means, which inevitably cancels its efficacy. Rather, the very inaccessibility of the source, and the story's immediate concern with the problem of identity raised by Dante in *Paradiso* XXI, 121-23, suggest that the issue at stake is more personal. Indeed the desire "to wipe out the memory" of the past, which is noted by the scholar with regard to Damiani's solution to the *quaestio*, constitutes a fundamental clue for the understanding of the psychological aspects which are involved here, as her textual analysis goes on to reveal:

In a (later) poem by Borges entitled "Emerson", we find that thoughts attributed to him repeat Borges's own often expressed regrets, and subtly tie in with 'La otra muerte': 'Por todo el continente anda mi nombre; *No he vivido*. Quisiera ser otro hombre' (58; see also Bell-Villada *Borges and His Fiction* 199-201).

In "La otra muerte", Borges alludes to the possibility of altering memory (rather than reversing past events), but what is interesting to note is the link between the author's imaginary 'amendment' of the past (a veritable extension of the metaphor of the 'book of memory', which now includes its own palinode), and the sexual restraint that he imposes on his character:

³ See Fishburn and Hughes 68-69, which also highlights Damiani's defence of celibacy, an important element in Borges's psychology.

Dios, que no puede cambiar el pasado, pero sí las *imágenes* del pasado, cambió la imagen de la muerte en la de un desfallecimiento, y la sombra del entrerriano volvió a su tierra. (...) Vivió en la soledad, *sin una mujer*, sin amigos. (574; my italics)

Now the issue of celibacy is at the heart of Damiani's solution to the problem of lost virginity. This involves the notions of sin and repentance through which man (this includes both sexes) is capable of moral improvement. Damiani's basic idea is that the practice of virtue can rectify vice and restore the purity of the soul. Borges's allusion to Damiani's treatise implicitly corroborates his early views on carnal love,⁴ but the link between courage (or lack of courage) and sexual impotence (or chastity) adds a private nuance that is otherwise concealed in his work. Here we are no longer in the public space of literature: this is solitary writing venturing through the forbidden zone of memory and the unconscious. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to reduce the story's significance to its psychological aspect. Borges's statement: "Sospecho que en mi relato hay falsos recuerdos. Sospecho que Pedro Damián (si existió) no se llamó Pedro Damián" (575), indicates that there are other biographic and textual allusions in it. Indeed, the poem "Isidoro Acevedo" (OC 1: 86-87) gives the clue to this enigma and provides a different angle for the understanding of its compositional basis.

A final observation. I have referred to the Cavalcantian notion of love as an obscure passion capable of subjugating the power of practical reason. As I have noted, Dante maintained at a certain stage (though not in the *Vita nuova* or in the *Commedia*) the inevitability of love and its power to rule over the individual by neutralising his free will. On the other hand, in "El Zahir" Borges refers to the coin as a symbol of free will ("una moneda simboliza nuestro libre albedrío"), but then makes a parenthetical remark in which he implicitly reverts the equation: "No sospecha yo que esos "pensamientos" eran un artificio contra el Zahir y una primera forma de su de-

⁴ See, for instance, "Casa Elena (hacia una estética del lupanar en España)", first published in *Ultra* 17 (1921); now in *Textos recobrados* 112-13; "El Paseo de Julio" (OC I: 95-96). I explore this issue in my "Love, Sex, and Hell in Borges's Early Lyrics", *Donaire*, 13 (1999) 27-35.

moníaco influjo" (591). In effect, the obsession with the coin becomes so strong that it destroys the character's freedom of action, reducing him – and its victims – to a sort of vegetative entity devoid of any sense of personality. We have seen how, in the prose poem "El amenazado", Borges describes the process of love as a an imprisonment of the self ("Crecen los muros de su cárcel"), and it is clear that in the short story the protagonist experiences the same ordeal. This parallel is reinforced by the feeling of persecution that characterizes both instances. Whilst in the former the sense of oppression is reflected in the narrator's psychotic behaviour ("Tendré que ocultarme o que huir; (...) Ya los ejércitos me cercan"), in "El Zahir" the idea is explicit: "la imagen de un objeto cualquiera solía perseguirme" (593). I am not suggesting that the problem of human freedom raised by Borges in "El Zahir" implies a direct reference to the issue of self-determination in Dante, although his essay on Francesca da Rimini ("El verdugo piadoso", published in 1948) indicates that the question of moral responsibility was central to his emotional and intellectual concerns. However, Borges's discussion of the episode does not take in consideration the connection between love and free will as it was actually understood and debated by Dante and his contemporaries. This affects his interpretation of the canto, which attributes to Dante a deterministic view of moral action that is entirely at odds with the doctrine of free will maintained in the *Commedia*. Borges is aware of the eccentricity of his argument, and he gets round the problem by adding a parenthetical remark which eliminates the possibility of further discussion: "[Dante] sintió (no comprendió) que los actos del hombre son necesarios" (*OC* 3: 359). It is true that for the medieval spirit the theme of destiny is linked to the notion of celestial influence. Although Dante deals with the idea of astrological determinism in *Purgatorio* XVI, 67-84, there is a controverted passage in the *Paradiso* which may lend support to Borges's conjecture:

S'elli intende tornare a queste ruote
 l'onor de la influenza e 'l biasmo, forse
 in alcun vero suo arco percuote. (*Paradiso* IV, 58-60)

In these obscure lines Dante seems to concede some truth to the idea that the stars can influence human life, but his intention is

clearly detached from a negative or deterministic viewpoint, as the following *terzina* (lines 61-63) indicates:

Questo principio, male inteso, torse
 già tutto il mondo quasi, sì che Giove,
 Mercurio e Marte a nominar trascorse.

As a matter of fact, Borges's whimsical interpretation is reminiscent of Schopenhauer, who sees in the Christian doctrine of predestination an illustration of man's primogenial belief in the strict necessity of every natural event (I: 293; *Prize Essay* 54). Indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to cite the opening *terzina* of *Paradiso IV* as Dante's tacit acknowledgement of moral determinism (52).

Nevertheless, putting aside Borges's 'misreading' of the moral issue in the *Commedia*, what is interesting to note is the thematic coincidence between the essay and the short story with regard to the problem of moral determinism. This is echoed in the notion of an external influence which takes control over the individual, in "El Zahir" through the coin's overwhelming power ("su demoniaco *influjo*"); and in the essay through the reference to the doctrine of celestial influence in canto XVI of the *Purgatorio*: "Si los actos dependieran del influjo estelar, quedaría anulado nuestro albedrío" (359). In the former, Borges puts into practice this premise and its conclusion, except that he substitutes the inevitability of astral influence by the defeating power of love, which is the dominant drive of the story. But it would be risky to advance further in this direction, for there is no evidence that Borges was developing in the story the problematics of love and free will within a specific Dantean context.

To conclude: Sufi literature transformed the language and imagery of Arab erotic poetry into a rich and highly symbolical vocabulary of mystical aspiration. A similar process of consecration of the language of human love took effect in the Judeo-Christian literary tradition long before the troubadours were to create their own religion of love. Like the troubadours, Borges inverted the equation: he used mystical and symbolical elements in order to construct narratives about love and unfulfilled desire.

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