

BORGES AND SCHOPENHAUER: AESTHETICAL OBSERVATION
AND THE ENIGMA OF "EL ZAHIR"

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In his *Autobiographical Essay*, written in 1970, Borges confesses: "At some point while in Switzerland, I began reading Schopenhauer. Today, were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him" (Borges "Autobiographical" 216). And indeed Schopenhauer is the most quoted philosopher in the work of Borges, which abounds with citations related to philosophy (Fishburn 218). Moreover, Borges (notoriously skeptical) periodically uses zealous declarations concerning Schopenhauer's philosophy. Thus, for example, in the epilogue to the English translation of his book *El Hacedor* (*Dreamtigers*), he states that few things have happened to him "more worthy of remembrance than Schopenhauer's thought and the music of England's words" (*Dreamtigers* 93). Concordantly, in the essay "Sobre los clásicos," published in *Otras Inquisiciones* (1952), Borges states that he, who became suspicious of Shakespeare's and Voltaire's eternalness, has no doubt about Schopenhauer's and Berkeley's eternalness (*Obras completas* 2: 151). It is therefore clear that a study of the presence of Schopenhauer's philosophy in the work of Borges would be, as Alazraki suggests, revealing and fertile (*Prosa* 39). In fact, several studies have already investigated the link between Schopenhauer and Borges, among them: Wheelock (1969),

Christ (1969), Paoli (1986), Alazraki (1988), Jaén (1992), and Almeida (2004). All of them have dealt with Schopenhauer's metaphysics, focusing either on the theme of the cosmic Will that entails the microcosmic-macrocosmic reflection, or with the idealistic theme of the world as a mental representation. Almeida had also dealt with Schopenhauer's aesthetics, concentrating on the metaphysical traits of music. In his comprehensive study he analytically draws an analogy between Schopenhauer's concept of musicality (*musicalidad*) and Borges's concept of intonation (*entonación*) (Almeida 107-112). In the following essay I do not intend to characterize Schopenhauer's metaphysics, nor do I intend to flaunt Schopenhauer's influence on Borges's work. Rather, I will focus on the epistemological aspects of Schopenhauer's influential philosophy of aesthetics, presented in his book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Moreover, my aim is to demonstrate how Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetics may serve as an observation post to a Borgesian text. More specifically, I intend to demonstrate how Schopenhauer's perception of aesthetical observation may elucidate one of Borges's most controversial texts: the short story "El Zahir." The justification for selecting this text is simple; "El Zahir" is about a visual encounter between a protagonist who mourns his lover's death ("Borges") and a simple, yet monstrously unforgettable, Argentine coin ("the Zahir"). As will be described in detail, this event clearly resembles Schopenhauer's description of the process of aesthetical observation. In this way, the viewpoint of Schopenhauer's aesthetics will establish a non-psychological interpretation to the Borgesian story. In order to carry out this task, I will include in the following essay three sections: 1) Borges and Schopenhauer: an overview; 2) Schopenhauer's view of aesthetical observation; 3) Borges's "El Zahir" and Schopenhauer's aesthetical observation. The comparative study of Schopenhauer and Borges will also show how a philosophical text might serve in preparing a comprehensive and coherent interpretation for an ambiguous literary text.

1) BORGES AND SCHOPENHAUER: AN OVERVIEW

According to Emir Rodríguez Monegal's literary biography of Borges, young Georgie, in his teens, discovered the philosophy of Schopenhauer while reading the works of Carlyle in Geneva (Rodríguez Monegal 130). He then allegedly decided to learn German, "the philosopher's language," by himself using Heine's poetry book and a German dictionary. Thereafter he tried to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in German and, unsurprisingly, failed. He moved on to read Schopenhauer and was deeply impressed by his "lucid and passionate" mode of writing (Borges *Labyrinths* 12); henceforth, he repeatedly and zealously reread Schopenhauer. Borges's affinity with the German philosopher is clearly expressed in the abovementioned section from his *Autobiographical Essay*:

At some point while in Switzerland, I began reading Schopenhauer. Today, were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him. If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in his writings. I have read him many times over, both in German and, with my father and his close friend Macedonio Fernández, in translation. (Borges "Autobiographical" 216-17)

This quotation clearly indicates that Schopenhauer is constantly considered by Borges as the most important philosopher among philosophers (let us remember that the "Autobiographical Essay" was written on 1970, while Borges was in his seventies). Nevertheless, Borges does manifest here a skeptical hesitation by using a conditional form: *if* philosophy can express the riddle of the universe, *then* the riddle might be expressed in Schopenhauer's work. Finally, the remark about Macedonio Fernández, an Argentinean idealistic philosopher, stresses the idealistic dimension of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Thus, it appears that Borges's affinity with Schopenhauer's thought should be clarified in the context of his general view of philosophy, and in particular, his view of idealistic doctrines. Each of these venerable issues requires a detailed study, and here I will restrict myself to some synoptical remarks. As to philosophy, Borges's skepticism is well-known. It is enough to

mention here his declaration that "The inventions of philosophy are not less fantastic than the inventions of art."¹ Nevertheless, there is no need to sweepingly conclude that Borges reduces philosophy to a mere fiction.² After all, there are other intonations in his work that should not be overlooked. Ever since his father guided him into the icy fields of philosophy while he was only ten, metaphysics became one of his prominent and constant intellectual preoccupations; in fact he once described himself as "an Argentine adrift on a sea of metaphysics."³ Moreover, in his essay "De las alegorías a las novelas" he concludes a discussion on a dispute between Plato (realism) and Aristotle (nominalism) with the following remark:

[I]t can be stated that, for realism, universals (Plato would call them ideas, forms; we would call them abstract concepts) were the essential; for nominalism, individuals. The history of philosophy is not a useless museum of distractions and wordplay; the two hypotheses correspond, in all likelihood, to two ways of intuiting reality.⁴

How can we resolve these contradictory remarks? It seems that this incompatibility characterizes Borges's ambivalent - rather than negating - relation to philosophy and metaphysics (quite similar to Plato's ambivalent relation of poetry (Murray 8)). Of particular interest is the question of Borges's outlook of idealistic philosophy. Borges has repeatedly acknowledged his affinity of idealism,

¹ "Las invenciones de la filosofía no son menos fantásticas que las del arte" (*Obras completas* 2: 47).

² For instance consider Alazraki's remark: "By making them [philosophical theories] function as the coordinates of his short stories, Borges evinces their fallacy and their condition of being not "a mirror of the world, but rather [of] one thing more added to the world" (*Kabbalah* 141).

³ "un argentino extraviado en la metafísica" (*Obras completas* 2: 135)

⁴ "cabe, sin embargo, afirmar que para el realismo lo primordial eran los universals (Platón diría las ideas, las formas; nosotros, los conceptos abstractos), y para el nominalismo, los individuos. La historia de la filosofía, no es un vano museo de distracciones y de juegos verbales; verosíblemente, las dos tesis corresponden a dos maneras de intuir la realidad" (*Obras completas* 2: 124).

"perhaps the most ancient and most widely known"⁵ doctrine. He frequently interweaves idealistic systems into the fabric of his texts, mostly mentioning Plato, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, Kabbalistic doctrines, and Buddhism. Thus, in an English interview given in his eighties he declares:

Borges: I tend to think of things as being illusory. The idea of the world as a dream is not alien to me... As to realism, I always thought it was essentially false.

Coffa: It seems to me that most of these metaphors that I have seen in your writings are in some sense used to support some versions of idealism, if I may use that argument.

Borges: I suppose they do... Mirrors and copulations are the same thing. They stand for creating images, not realities. (Barnstone 164-65)

It is worthwhile to mention some Borgesian texts that are predominantly devoted to idealistic issues: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (depicting a fictional idealistic planet), "Las ruinas circulares" (depicting a sorcerer who undertakes to dream a man and to impose him upon reality), "Formas de una leyenda" (dealing with the life of the Buddha), "El sueño de Coleridge" (depicting how Coleridge, in his poem, dreamed about the palace of Kubla Khan, who also learned about the plan of his palace in a dream), and many others. Nevertheless, Borges rejects any attempt to define him as a philosophical idealist; in an English interview given in 1967, he remarks:

I thought above all of the literary possibility of Idealist philosophies. Let's say, rather than its intrinsic merits. This does not mean necessarily that I believe in the philosophy of Berkeley or Schopenhauer... I believe I was thinking rather of the alchemy of unreality of the material world as subjects usable by literature (Sturrock 22)

How can these issues be settled? Borges, unquestionably, tends to reject any fixed definition, and in particular, a definition of his own

⁵ "la más antigua y la más divulgada" (*Obras completas* 2: 144).

thought. Thus in the Charles Eliot Norton lecture, given at Harvard in 1967-1968, he remarks: "I would like to say that we make a very common mistake when we think that we're ignorant of something because we are unable to define it. If we are in a Chestertonian mood...we might say that we can define something only when we know nothing about it" (Borges *Craft* 17). So we shouldn't attempt to define Borges's way of thinking; we may only speak of his inclination - rather than his rejection or upholding - of idealistic doctrines. In concluding this short discussion, it can be noted that Borges maintains an ambivalent relation to philosophy in general, and a bias towards idealistic philosophy in particular.

Returning to Schopenhauer, several justifications have been attributed to Borges's affinity with the German philosopher's work: 1) the idealistic trait of Schopenhauer's philosophy; 2) Schopenhauer's "lucid and passionate" literary style; 3) the Buddhist infrastructure of Schopenhauer's philosophy; 4) Schopenhauer's pessimism; and 5) Schopenhauer's repudiation of logo-centrism, expressed by his irrational metaphysics of the Will (Rodríguez Monegal 140). All these justifications are plausible; nevertheless, they do not explain why Schopenhauer is considered as *the* most important of all philosophers by such a skeptical scholar as Borges. Borges's own zealous justification can be useful: as quoted above, he proclaims that "If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in his writings." Let us compare this declaration with Borges's often-quoted saying, given in his essay "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins": "obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and speculative. The reason is quite simple: we do not know what the universe is."⁶ The latter declaration seems to categorically deny any possibility of a true philosophical account of the universe, whereas the former suggests that Schopenhauer's philosophy might serve as a key to that riddle. Once again, how can we resolve the difference between these viewpoints? We can of course presume that Borges is simply

⁶ "notoriamente no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural. La razón es muy simple: no sabemos qué cosa es el universo" (*Obras completas* 2: 86).

inconsistent; after all, he once confessed: "I cannot say whether my work is poetry or not, I can only say that my appeal is to the imagination. I am not a thinker. I am merely a man who has tried to explore the literary possibilities of metaphysics and of religion" (Borges *Selected Poems* xiii). But that sweeping conclusion seems to me a convenient, yet rather unconvincing loophole. Let us carefully probe Borges's view of Schopenhauer's philosophy. As mentioned before, he shows some hesitation by using the conditional form. In his essay "Avatares de la tortuga" he expresses this hesitation more explicitly:

It is venturesome to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much...I would even assert that the only one [philosophy] in which I recognize some vestige of the universe is that formulated by Schopenhauer.⁷

It seems that here Borges upholds Plato's original notion of philosophy as "*philo-sophia*" (yearning for wisdom): an interminable approaching to perpetual knowledge (*episteme*).⁸ In this way, all metaphysics can be considered (as Plato puts it in the outset of his dialogue *Timaeus*) as an *eikôs mythos*: a plausible account - rather than a logical delineation - of genuine reality. From this viewpoint Schopenhauer's metaphysics might have been considered by Borges as the most plausible account of the universe, as the most *eikôs mythos*. Accordingly, in his essay "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," following the aforementioned manifestation of harsh epistemological skepticism, Borges adds: "The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot, however, dissuade us from planning human schemes, even though it is clear

⁷ " Es aventurado pensar que una coordinación de palabras (otra cosa no son las filosofías) pueda parecerse mucho al universo... me atrevo a asegurar que solo en la [filosofía] que formuló Schopenhauer he reconocido algún rasgo del universo" (*Obras completas* 1: 258).

⁸ See, for instance, Socrates' oration in Plato's *Symposium*.

that they are provisional";⁹ Schopenhauer's philosophy might have been considered by Borges as the most plausible of all *human* schemes. Lastly, I would like to suggest another justification for Borges's affinity with Schopenhauer's thought: the Argentinean writer might have been deeply impressed by the German philosopher's perception of art as the ultimate mode of expressing the essence of reality. After all, in his youth Borges had founded Argentine Ultraism, whose main ambition was to obtain an absolute art which did not depend on the uncertain prestige of words, an art which is as atemporal as the stars (Rodríguez Monegal 173). This zealous ambition resounds in the fifth stanza of one of his most intimate poems, "Arte poética," written in 1960:

A veces en las tardes una cara
nos mira desde el fondo de un espejo;
el arte debe ser como ese espejo
que nos revela nuestra propia cara. (*Obras completas* 2: 221)¹⁰

This Borgesian view coincides with, perhaps even reflects, Schopenhauer's perception of art:

But now, what kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the *Ideas* that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself, of the Will? It is *art*, the work of genius.¹¹

⁹ "La imposibilidad de penetrar el esquema divino del universo no puede, sin embargo, disuadirnos de planear esquemas humanos, aunque nos conste que éstos son provisorios" (*Obras completas* 2: 86).

¹⁰ At times in the evening a face
looks at us out of the depths of a mirror;
art should be like that mirror
which reveals to us our own face.

¹¹ "-Welche Erkenntnissart nun aber betrachtet jenes ausser und unabhängig von aller Relation bestehende allein eigentlich Wesentliche der Welt, den wahren Gehalt ihrer

In order to clarify this outlook, Schopenhauer's aesthetic perception will be highlighted in the following section.

2) SCHOPENHAUER'S VIEW OF AESTHETICAL OBSERVATION

Schopenhauer's metaphysics displays an ontological monism that can be reduced to a simple statement: behind the vertiginous plurality of the world lies solely one essence, the cosmic Will. Following Immanuel Kant's dichotomy of Noumena/Phenomena (the thing-in-itself/ the perception of the thing), Schopenhauer presents a dichotomy of Will/Representation. In the outset of his most important book, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, he thus states: "everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation...The world is representation."¹² This is the idealistic trait of Schopenhauer's philosophy which coincides with the Kantian outlook. And yet in sharp contrast to Kant, he also claims that the thing-in-itself (i.e. the objective essence of reality that is, according to Schopenhauer, the cosmic Will) *can* be perceived. In short, Schopenhauer's argument, clearly presented in chapter XVIII of the second volume of the book, is as follows: 1) Man exists in reality; therefore he *is* the thing-in-itself. 2) Man knows his own body from within. 3) Man perceives himself intuitively (i.e. directly and wholly) as a will-to-live. 4) The metaphysical essence of reality cannot be divided, thus knowing it partially means knowing it entirely. 5) Man's own metaphysical essence is thus equal to the whole metaphysical essence of reality. 6) Man's will (inner essence) is thus a manifestation of the cosmic Will. 7) The metaphysical

Erscheinungen, das keinem Wechsel Unterworfenen und daher für alle Zeit mit gleicher Wahrheit Erkante, mit Einem Wort, *die Ideen*, welche die unmittelbare und adäquate Objektivität des Dinges an sich, des Willens sind? -Es ist *die Kunst*, das Werk des Genius" (*Welt 1*: 223-24).

¹² "...dass alles, was für die Erkenntnis da ist, also diese ganze Welt, nur Objekt in Beziehung auf das Subjekt ist, Anschauung des Anschauenden, mit Einem Wort, Vorstellung. ... Die Welt ist Vorstellung" (*Welt 1*: 4).

essence of reality, the thing-in-itself, is thus the cosmic Will. 8) Man can intuitively perceive the thing-in-itself, the cosmic Will.¹³ Three important conclusions stem from this argument:

- i) The metaphysical essence of reality is the Will. This is the ontological trait of this outlook.
- ii) The essence of reality can be intuitively perceived. This is the epistemological trait of this outlook.
- iii) Man's essence is a manifestation of reality's essence. This microcosmic-macrocosmic relation can actually be applied to every possible object in the world.

These premises also underlie Schopenhauer's aesthetics which, as he has declared, does not intend to manifest a systematic theory of art but rather proposes a metaphysics of beauty (Philonenko 115). In the foundation of his aesthetics lies the distinction between scientific and artistic knowledge: whereas science investigates the *relations* between spatiotemporal objects under the principle of sufficient reason (i.e. the principle of causality), artistic intuition deals exclusively with the object's essence, i.e. with the question *what* is the object. According to Schopenhauer, this essence is the Platonic Idea represented by the object, an Idea which is a pure objectification of the cosmic Will (*Welt* 1: 223-24). Let us clarify this point. Let us consider a white cat climbing up an oak tree. Science will investigate the relations between the cat and its surroundings in light of the principle of sufficient reason (the principle of causality). Artistic observation, on the other hand, will focus on unfolding the Idea of the whole cat-species represented by our concrete cat. In short, according to Schopenhauer, science deals with concrete objects and their mutual interrelations (representations), whereas art deals solely with isolated Ideas (pure objectifications of the thing-in-itself). Therefore art is more philosophical than science, since it brings us

¹³ This argument is, actually, very ancient. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* ("the song of God") of the Hindu religion, the god Krishna teaches Arjuna the road to real knowledge: it is through the physical practice of Yoga that the apprentice becomes intuitively aware of the union of his own essence, the Ataman, and the cosmic essence, the Brahaman. Thus, in this view through the physical practice of Yoga man can perceive the Metaphysical essence of reality.

closer to observing the real essence of reality.¹⁴ In other words, since the Idea is the cosmic Will perceived as an object by the subject, the perception of the Idea (i.e. artistic intuition) is the highest level of consciousness. Thus, in Schopenhauer's view, artistic observation is a pure cognitive activity: its exclusive content is the eternal Idea.

Schopenhauer continues, claiming that whereas artistic observation is an innate human faculty, the sole generator of the work of art is the genius. As manifested in chapter XXXI of the second volume of the book, the genius is an extraordinary human being who maintains an abundance of intellectual *visual* faculty: the genius' personality comprises 1/3 will-to-live and 2/3 pure intellect, contrary to an ordinary personality that comprises 1/3 pure intellect and 2/3 will-to-live. Hence the intellect of the genius oversteps the subordination of the will-to-live. This digression enables the genius to carry out an *objective* observation: his thought flies above the objects of the world, free from the servitude of the subjective will. Such an objective observation enables the genius to perceive the general aspect of every particular object, to see the eternal Idea in every ephemeral thing using his faculty of imagination that purifies his observation (*Welt 1*: 224-225). Thus, the gist of the genuine work of art, the product of the genius, is an objective content: the work of art represents the communication of the eternal Idea perceived by the genius. And yet, according to Schopenhauer, such an extremely rare disengagement of the intellect from the will establishes an affinity between being a genius and being afflicted by abnormal states of madness. As minutely manifested in chapter XXXII of the second volume of the book, madness is a rupture of the thread of memory that entails a split between the present and the past, and concordantly being a genius represents a split of the perceived object from all kinds of relations to other objects (*Welt 2*: 497). Moreover, since the genius focuses on the object so excessively, he loses any connection with the rest of the world, which is also manifested in states of madness. Hence the genius quality is simultaneously

¹⁴ This view sharply opposes Plato's view of art as a third-grade representation (mimesis) of the Idea, mainly presented in book X of his *Republic*.

fortune and misfortune, a gift of nature and a curse of fate. Schopenhauer remarks that whereas in the moments of artistic inspiration the genius is extremely pleased, in his everyday life he is quite miserable due to the heavy burden of his excessive power of observation:

Then, by the virtue of its [the genius's unique consciousness] enhanced power of knowledge, it will see in things more of the universal than of the particular, whereas the service of the will mainly requires knowledge of the particular. And again, when that entire, abnormally enhanced power of knowledge occasionally directs itself suddenly with all its energy to the affairs and miseries of the will, it will readily apprehend them too vividly, will view everything in too glaring colors, in too bright a light, and in a monstrously exaggerated form; and in this way the individual falls into mere extremes. The following may help to explain this in even greater detail. All great theoretical achievements, be they of what kind they may, are brought about by their author directing all the forces of his mind to one point. He causes them to be united at this point and concentrates them so vigorously, firmly, and exclusively, that all the rest of the world vanishes for him, and his object for him fills all reality. It is just this great and powerful concentration, forming one of the privileges of genius, which sometimes appears for it, even in the case of objects of reality and of the events of everyday life. Brought under such a focus, these are then magnified to such monstrous proportions that they appear like the flea that under the solar microscope assumes the stature of an elephant.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Sodann wird es [das Genie], vermöge seiner gesteigerten Erkenntnisskraft, in den Dingen mehr das Allgemeine, als das Einzelne sehen; während der Dienst des Willens hauptsächlich die Erkenntniss des Einzelnen erfordert. Aber wann nun wieder gelegentlich jene ganze, abnorm erhöhte Erkenntnisskraft sich plötzlich, mit aller ihrer Energie, auf die Angelegenheiten und Misere des Willens richtet; so wird sie diese leicht zu lebhaft auffassen, Alles in zu grellen Farben, zu hellem Lichte, und ins Ungeheure vergrössert erblicken, wodurch das Individuum auf lauter Extreme verfällt. Dies noch näher zu erklären, diene Folgendes. Alle grosse theoretische Leistungen, worin es auch sei, werden dadurch zu Stande gebracht, dass ihr Urheber alle Kräfte seines Geistes auf Einen Punkt richtet, in welchen er sie zusammenschiesst lässt und konzentriert, so stark, fest und ausschliesslich, dass die ganze übrige Welt ihm jetzt

Consequently, the genius's personality comprises the following psychological characteristics: oversensitivity, melancholy, an inclination to emotional instability, extreme introversion, and a total inability to sustain genuine emotional relationships with ordinary humans (*Welt 2*: 492-498).¹⁶

We have seen that, according to Schopenhauer, the crux of the aesthetical contemplation is the cognitive dimension of observation. Let us now minutely examine the epistemological process of this mode of observation. Schopenhauer writes:

[We] devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in this object, to use a pregnant expression; in other words, we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception... the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; he is *pure* will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*.¹⁷

verschwindet und sein Gegenstand ihm alle Realität ausfüllt. Eben diese grosse und gewaltsame [Koncentration](#), die zu den Privilegien des Genies gehört, tritt nun für dasselbe bisweilen auch bei den Gegenständen der Wirklichkeit und den Angelegenheiten des täglichen Lebens ein, welche alsdann, unter einen solchen Fokus gebracht, eine so monströse Vergrösserung erhalten, dass sie sich darstellen wie der im Sonnenmikroskop die Statur des Elefanten annehmende Floh" (*Welt 2*: 496-97).

¹⁶ By the way, women do not have to worry; Schopenhauer remarks in the abovementioned paragraph that a woman might be extremely gifted but not a genius since women are always subjective and the genius maintains an objective observation. This might be the key to the personal traits of Teodelina Villar, the protagonist's lover in the Borges story "El Zahir."

¹⁷ "[Wenn man] ... die ganze Macht seines Geistes der Anschauung hingiebt, sich ganz in diese versenkt und das ganze Bewusstseyn ausfüllen lässt durch die ruhige Kontemplation des grade

In analyzing this section, we can see that Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetical observation is based on the following premises:

- 1) Every particular thing can serve as an object of artistic observation.
- 2) The observed thing is being isolated from the stream of the world's course and is the exclusive object of contemplation.
- 3) The image of the observed thing fills up the entire consciousness of the observer.
- 4) The beholder's consciousness merges with the image of the observed thing. This unification resembles the *unia mistica* (mystical union with divinity) of the mystics.¹⁸
- 5) The particular thing, which in the spatiotemporal stream of the world's course was an infinitesimal part, becomes a representative of the whole: the timeless and spaceless (Platonic) Idea.
- 6) The observer completely loses his subjective personality in the act of observation. He becomes a timeless and a will-less observer: "a pure subject of knowledge," a "clear mirror" and a "pure eye" of the world.¹⁹

gegenwärtigen natürlichen Gegenstandes, sei es eine Landschaft, ein Baum, ein Fels, ein Gebäude oder was auch immer; indem man nach einer sinnvollen Teutschen Redensart, sich gänzlich in diesen Gegenstand *verliert*, d.h. eben sein Individuum, seinen Willen, vergisst und nur noch als reines Subjekt, als klarer Spiegel des Objekts bestehend bleibt; so dass man nur noch weiss, dass hier angeschaut wird, aber nicht mehr weiss, wer der Anschauende ist und überhaupt nicht mehr den Anschauenden von der Anschauung trennen kann, sondern beide Eines geworden sind und das ganze Bewusstseyn von einem einzigen anschaulichen Bilde gänzlich gefüllt und eingenommen ist ... eben dadurch ist zugleich der in dieser Anschauung Begriffene nicht mehr Individuum: denn das Individuum hat sich eben in solche Anschauung verloren; sondern er ist *reines, willenloses, schmerzloses, zeitloses Subjekt der Erkenntniss*" (*Welt* 1: 216-217).

¹⁸ In Jewish Kabbalah this mystical union is called *Dvekut*; In Sufi mysticism it is called *Tawahid*; In Christian mysticism it is called *Unia Mistica*. The Buddhist notion of *Nirvana* can be perceived, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, as a union of the self and reality. As mentioned before, the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita* depicts the unification of *Ataman* (the self) and *Brahaman* (Divinity). For a description of the psychological and philosophical characteristics of the mystical union see William James.

¹⁹ This outlook resembles the notion of *Anata* (the loss of concrete personality) in Buddhism. See Rahula.

7) Aesthetical observation is then a pure objective cognitive observation.

8) Aesthetical observation entails the cessation of all suffering since the will-to-live, the source of all pain and frustration, is now being annihilated.²⁰ And yet this state is transitory: it lasts only as long as the act of artistic observation lasts.

9) Aesthetical observation does not entail an experience of pleasure, as Kant assumed, but rather a "painless and happiness-less" experience, a state called by Epicurus *ataraxia* (complete tranquillity).²¹

10) During the artistic observation, both the perceived thing and the perceiving subject are beyond time, space, and any relation to other entities. Schopenhauer calls this state, following Spinoza, *sub specie aeternitatis* (an observation from the viewpoint of eternity). Here, too, this state is transitory.

Lastly, it should be noted that there are actually two modes of aesthetical observation in Schopenhauer's philosophy: the beautiful and the sublime. In order to experience the beautiful, the observer renounces his will-to-live without any struggle; he just lets it go and forgets all about himself, being completely involved in his observation. On the other hand, once the observed thing threatens the will-to-live (i.e. in case of observing a hurricane) the beholder must struggle with his will-to-live and consciously renounce it. In light of this discussion, let us now turn to observe (hopefully with pleasure) Borges's "El Zahir."

²⁰ This resembles the notion of *Nirvana* (the extinction of all willing) in Buddhism.

²¹ This resembles the notion of *Tanhakhaya* (the cessation of the thirst) of Buddhism. Actually, Schopenhauer is rather inconsistent at this point. In volume I, clause 42, he states that aesthetical pleasure actually comprises two sources: the tranquility that stems from the annihilation of the will-to-live and the observation of the pure beauty of the eternal Idea.

3) BORGES'S "EL ZAHIR" AND SCHOPENHAUER'S AESTHETICAL OBSERVATION

Schopenhauer's aesthetics will now serve as an observation post to Borges's short story "El Zahir." The story was published in the Argentine periodical *Anales de Buenos Aires*, edited by Borges, on July 1947. It was reprinted in the book *El Aleph* (Losada) in June 1949. The gist of the plot is simple: the protagonist "Borges" accidentally encounters an ordinary Argentinean coin at the wake of his lover, Teodelina Villar. It appears that the image of the coin is monstrously unforgettable; the obsessed protagonist cannot rid himself of his *idée fixe*. After reading Julius Barlach's monograph *The Origins of the Legend of the Zahir* (*Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahirsage*), the protagonist realizes the source of his obsession. He reads that belief in the Zahir is of Islamic ancestry and that "in Muslim countries, the masses use the word [Zahir] for "beings or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually derives people mad."²² Eventually the protagonist realizes that his fate will not be different. This seemingly simple plot evokes several queries: what exactly is the Zahir, an epistemological effect or a special ontological sort of an object? What is the meaning of the Zahir's obsession? What is the meaning of the protagonist's madness? What is the link between the observation of the Zahir and the death of the protagonist's lover? What is the link between the observation of the Zahir and the frequently mentioned mystical experience that Sufis underwent? Borgesian scholars have offered different responses to these queries. For instance, Alazraki interprets the text on the basis of a Kabbalistic legend about an unforgettable coin; in his view the story manifests the microcosmic-macrocosmic relation, similar to other Borgesian texts such as "El Aleph," "La escritura del Dios," and "El acercamiento a Almotásim" (*Kabbalah* 45). According to Rodríguez Monegal, the plot is an erudite disguise for

²² "la plebe, en tierras musulmanes, lo dice de "los seres o cosas que tienen la terrible virtud de ser invidables y cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente" (*Obras completas* 1: 593).

a failed erotic love: in this view the coin is a symbol of the unforgettable dead lover (413). Following Rodríguez Monegal, Núñez-Faraco interprets the story as a variation of the ancient motif of love-madness, claiming that Borges "uses mystical and symbolical elements in order to construct narrative about love and unfulfilled desire" (152). Cohen opposes this psychological approach and in his view the plot of the Zahir depicts mystical obsession so that the protagonist's preoccupation manifests a metaphysical horror in the face of Nothingness (80). Alternatively, Jaén assumes that the story exhibits what he calls "the loss of salvation": the protagonist's experience of metaphysical salvation as a prison and his craving to return to his banal way of life (172-75). Lastly, Massuh interprets the plot as a symbol of the linguistic cage of the narrator. In her view, the Zahir represents the chaos of a narrator locked up in the limits of his own fiction and words (197). We can see, then, that these commentaries are utterly different; many queries remain unsolved. All in all, as Gabriela Massuh remarks, the meaning of the Zahir, as well as the protagonist's madness, remains undeciphered despite the detective structure of the plot. In her view the unresolved enigma of the Zahir demonstrates that the riddle of the story resides outside the limits of its plot and its language (191-192). *And yet, and yet...* it seems that there is no need to go too far. At this point I will try to present a coherent and comprehensive, non-psychological interpretation of the plot of "El Zahir" in the light of Schopenhauer's aesthetics. In order to analytically carry out the task I will deal with each of the abovementioned queries separately.

3.1.) THE OBSERVATION OF THE ZAHIR

The fundamental question is quite simple: what is the thematic crux of the text? The reply is as simple as the question: the story is about an encounter of a protagonist with a coin. The encounter is genuinely a visual one: the protagonist sees the coin accidentally and his viewing of its image becomes uncannily unforgettable. Thus, when he first gets the coin, he says: "among my change I was given the Zahir; I looked at it for an instant, then walked outside into the

street, perhaps with the beginning of a fever."²³ Afterwards, the haunted protagonist carefully examines the coin and then, once he gets rid of it, he goes on to observe another coin (a pound sterling) desperately attempting to rid himself of the Zahir's obsession. And then he finds out, in Julius Barlach's monograph *The Sources of the Legend of the Zahir*, that "the word *Zahir* means in Arabic visible, manifest,"²⁴ so that the phenomenon of the Zahir essentially applies to *visual* observation. So what is the essence of visual observation? Schopenhauer remarks that the faculty of sight is the most objective of all senses, and that visual observation entails an act of comprehending what was seen (*Welt* 2: 486). As mentioned before, he also claims that the gist of the genius quality is the abundance of the faculty of vision. Heidegger's analysis of the notion of sight might be useful here. In his lectures on Plato's parable of the cave Heidegger asserts that the act of seeing genuinely entails an act of understanding, so that sight is a mode of cognitive observation (36). He also elucidates the Greek notion of "truth" (*alitheia*), which etymologically means "that which do not hide," as a direct observation of the "openness of Being" (41-42). Returning to Borges, from this viewpoint the encounter with the Zahir indicates: 1) an act of cognitive visual observation, and 2) a self-manifestation (or, to use Heidegger's words, openness) of the beheld object. These traits are clearly in accord with Schopenhauer's account of the genius' aesthetical observation. Indeed, the crux of the Borgesian protagonist's obsession is his incessant *vision* of the coin's image:

Time, which softens recollection, only makes the memory of the Zahir all the sharper. First I could see the face of it, then the reverse; now I can see both sides at once. It is not as though the Zahir were made of glass, since one side is not superimposed on the other -

²³ "en el vuelto me dieron el Zahir; lo miré un instante; salí a la calle, tal vez con un principio de fiebre" (*Obras completas* 1: 590).

²⁴ "*Zahir*, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible" (*Obras completas* 1: 593).

rather, it is as though the vision were itself spherical, with the Zahir rampant in the center.²⁵

Hence, the common denominator of both Borges's Zahir and Schopenhauer's aesthetics is the seeing-seen relation, in which a concrete man visually observes a concrete object.

3.2.) WHAT IS THE ZAHIR?

As seen from the ongoing dispute among Borges scholars, it is quite difficult to answer the seemingly simple question: what exactly is the Zahir, a concrete ontological object, a literary symbol, or an epistemological effect? Let us closely probe the text. At the outset Borges intriguingly introduces the Zahir:

In Buenos Aires the Zahir is a common twenty-centavo coin into which a razor or letter opener has scratched the letters *N T* and the number 2; the date stamped on the face is 1929. (In Gujarat, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Zahir was a tiger; in Java it was a blind man in the Surakarta mosque, stoned by the faithful; in Persia, an astrolabe that Nadir Shah ordered thrown into the sea; in the prisons of the Mahdi, in 1892, a small sailor's compass, wrapped in a shred of cloth from a turban, that Rudolf Karl von Slatin touched; in the synagogue in Córdoba, according to Zotenberg, a vein in the marble of one of the twelve hundred pillars; in the ghetto in Tetuán, the bottom of a wall.)²⁶

²⁵ "El tiempo, que atenúa los recuerdos, agrava el del Zahir. Antes yo me figuraba el anverso y después el reverse; ahora, veo simultáneamente los dos. Ello no ocurre como si fuera de crystal el Zahir, pues una cara no se superpone a la otra; más bien ocurre como si la visión fuera esférica y el Zahir campeara en el centro" (*Obras completas* 1: 594).

²⁶ "En Buenos Aires el Zahir es una moneda común, de veinte centavos; marcas de navaja o de cortaplumas rayan las letras *N T* y el número dos; 1929 es la fecha grabada en el anverso. (En Guzerat, a fines del siglo XVIII, un tigre fue Zahir; en Java, un ciego de la mezquita de Surakarta, a quien lapidaron los fieles; en Persia, un astrolabio que Nadir Shah hizo arrojar al fondo del mar; en las prisiones de Mahdí, hacia 1892, una pequeña brújula que Rudolph Carl von Slatin tocó, envuelta en un jirón de turbante; en la aljama de Córdoba, según Zotenberg, una veta en el mármol de uno de los mil

The Zahir is introduced in terms of quite different objects in different times and places, so in this case it seems useless to evoke Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance. As mentioned before, the protagonist reads in Barlach's monograph that, according to al-Yemeni, "there was no creature in the world that did not tend toward becoming a *Zaheer* [Zahir], but that the All-Merciful does not allow two things to be a *Zaheer* at the same time, since a single one is capable of enchanting multitudes."²⁷ The Zahir thus entails three essential characteristics: 1) it can be every haphazard thing in the world (a coin, a tiger, a compass, etc.); 2) it is always a particular thing perceived by a particular beholder; 3) once perceived, the image of the Zahir is a constant unforgettable object of contemplation, so that time has no effect on the memory of the Zahir. Let us now recall the traits of Schopenhauer's aesthetical object: 1) every infinitesimal part in the stream of the world's course, every concrete thing, can serve as an object of aesthetic contemplation; 2) artistic observation plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it; 3) the object is being perceived as a constant timeless Platonic Idea. The resemblance between Borges and Schopenhauer seems clear enough, but still, can Borges's unforgettable Zahir be conceived as a Platonic Idea as well? Let us remember the first thought of the protagonist after encountering the Zahir: "The thought struck me that there is no coin that is not the symbol of all the coins that shine endlessly down throughout history and fable."²⁸ Thereafter, he contemplates: "... I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since any coin (a twenty-centavo piece, for instance) is, in all truth, a panoply of possible futures.

doscientos pilares; en la judería de Tetuán, el fondo de un pozo)" (*Obras completas* 1: 589).

²⁷"éste le dijo que no había criatura en el orbe que no propendiera a *Zaheer* [Zahir], pero que el Todomisericordioso no deja que dos cosas lo sean a un tiempo, ya que una sola puede fascinar muchedumbres" (*Obras completas* 1: 594).

²⁸ "Pensé que no hay moneda que no sea símbolo de las monedas que sin fin resplandecen en la historia y la fábula" (*Obras completas* 1: 590-591).

Money is abstract, I said over and over, money is future time."²⁹ We can see that in both cases the concrete coin represents an abstract entity ("all coins," or "abstract time"), in accordance with Plato's outlook in which every mundane object in the physical world represents ("takes part in") an abstract Idea. It is also useful to recall Borges's own conception of the Platonic Idea. In the prologue to the second edition of his book *Historia de la eternidad* (1956), Borges remarks:

I do not know how I could have compared Plato's forms [Ideas] to "immobile museum pieces" and how I did not feel, reading Schopenhauer and Erigena, that these were alive, powerful, and organic. Movement, the occupation of different sites in different instants, is inconceivable without time; it is the same with relation to immobility, the occupation of the same place in different instants.³⁰

Borges relates here to his first opinion, expressed in the prologue to the first edition of the book in 1936. There he had conceived the Platonic Ideas as monstrous "immobile museum pieces"; this previous stance is in accord with the first thought of the Zahir, perceiving it as a timeless immobile symbol of all coins. On the other hand in the second edition's prologue the Platonic Ideas entail an everlasting duration of time, which coincides with the second thought of the Zahir, perceiving it as a panoply of possible futures. Hence Borges's literary formation of the Zahir seems to be in accord with his ambivalent perception of the Platonic Ideas. In conclusion, both Borges's Zahir and Schopenhauer's aesthetical objects are haphazard mundane objects that are being isolated from the endless concatenation of other objects in the world; both are perceived as a

²⁹ "Pensé que nada hay menos material que el dinero, ya que cualquier moneda (una moneda de veinte centavos, digamos) es, en rigor, un repertorio de futuros posibles. El dinero es abstracto, repetí, el dinero es tiempo futuro" (*Obras completas* 1: 591).

³⁰ "No sé cómo pude comparar a 'inmóviles piezas de museo' las formas de Platón y cómo no entendí, leyendo a Schopenhauer y al Erígena, que éstas son vivas, poderosas y orgánicas. El movimiento, ocupación de sitios distintos en instantes distintos, es inconcebible sin tiempo; asimismo lo es la inmovilidad, ocupación de un mismo lugar en distintos puntos del tiempo" (*Obras completas* 1: 351).

timeless, constant objects: horribly unforgettable in the case of Borges's Zahir and Platonic Idea in the case of Schopenhauer's aesthetics. So it can be plausibly concluded that Borges's Zahir is in accordance with Schopenhauer's aesthetical object.

3.3.) THE IMPACT OF THE ZAHIR

Concerning the impact of the aesthetical object on the observer's consciousness, we have seen that in Schopenhauer's view the image of the object fills up the whole scope of the observer's mind while the rest of the world vanishes, so that they actually become inseparable. This is clearly the most prominent impact of the horrible Zahir. Thus the protagonist confesses: "Time, which softens recollections, only makes the memory of the Zahir all the sharper ... anything that is not the Zahir comes to me as though through a filter, and from a distance."³¹ He also becomes aware of the fact that soon there will be nothing left for him besides the Zahir: "I will no longer perceive the universe, I will perceive the Zahir ... for me, thousands upon thousands of appearances will pass into one; a complex dream will pass into a simple one."³² Now how does it affect the beholder's personality? Schopenhauer declares that since the image of the object totally fulfills the genius's mind, he forgets his own will-to-live and temporarily renounces his concrete personality.³³ The genius thus becomes an abstract "clear mirror of the universe" or a "pure subject of knowledge" that objectively perceives the object as an Idea.

³¹ "El tiempo, que atenúa los recuerdos, agrava el del Zahir... Lo que no es el Zahir me llega tamizado y como lejano..." (*Obras completas* 1: 594)

³² "Ya no percibiré el universo, percibiré el Zahir...de miles de apariencias pasaré a una; de un sueño muy complejo a un sueño muy simple" (*Obras completas* 1: 595).

³³ The same process of self-forgetfulness can be detected in the mystical rituals of the Sufis. In the last paragraph of *The Zahir* Borges remarks that: "In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis repeat their own name or the ninety-nine names of God until the names mean nothing anymore. I long to travel that path. Perhaps by thinking about the Zahir unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away; perhaps behind that coin is God" ["Para perderse en Dios, los sufíes repiten su propio nombre o los noventa y nueve nombres divinos hasta que éstos ya nada quieren decir. Yo anhelo recorrer esa senda. Quizá yo acabe por gastar el Zahir a fuerza de pensarlo y de repensarlo; quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios" (*Obras completas* 1: 595)].

Consequently he reaches a state of *ataraxia*: complete painless and pleasure-less tranquility. Returning to the Borgesian text, it is clear that the protagonist, too, gradually loses his own personality. Thus at the outset of the story he declares: "last June 7, at dawn, the Zahir came into my hands; I am not the man I was then, but I am still able to recall, and perhaps recount, what happened. I am still, albeit only partially, Borges."³⁴ This process is irreversible, as opposed to Schopenhauer's temporary self-renunciation. Moreover, the protagonist's horror and suffering are conspicuous throughout the plot, contrary to the genius's tranquility. Such suffering might be explained by means of Schopenhauer's view of the sublime: here the observed object threatens the observer's will-to-live so that his self-renunciation entails a violent struggle. All in all, it is clear that, in accordance with Schopenhauer's view, the process leads the Borgesian protagonist to a state of complete *ataraxia*:

Before 1948, Julia's fate will have overtaken me. I will have to be fed and dressed, I will not know whether it's morning or night, I will not know who the man Borges was. Calling that future terrible is a fallacy, since none of the future's circumstances will in any way affect me. One might as well call "terrible" the pain of an anesthetized patient whose skull is being trepanned.³⁵

3.4.) THE ZAHIR AND THE DEAD LOVER

What is the relation between the Zahir and the protagonist's dead lover, Teodelina Villar? To put it in a more literary context, what is the link between the text's main plot (encountering the Zahir) and its subplot (the death of Teodelina)? The encounter with

³⁴ "el día siete de junio, a la madrugada, llegó a mis manos el Zahir; no soy el que era entonces pero aún me es dado recordar, y acaso referir, lo ocurrido. Aún, siquiera parcialmente, soy Borges" (*Obras completas* 1: 589)

³⁵ "Antes de 1948, el destino de Julia me habrá alcanzado. Tendrán que alimentarme y vestirme, no sabré si es de tarde o de mañana, no sabré quién fue Borges. Calificar de terrible ese provenir es una falacia, ya que ninguna de sus circunstancias obrará para mí. Tanto valdría mantener que es terrible el dolor de un anestesiado a quien le abren el cráneo" (*Obras completas* 1: 595).

the Zahir takes place at Teodelina's wake. The protagonist wanders afterwards through the streets, drunk with an almost impersonal pity:

I left her lying stiff among the flowers, her contempt for the world growing every moment more perfect in death. It was about two o'clock, I would guess, when I stepped into the streets. Outside, the predictable rank of one- and two-story houses had taken on that abstract air they often have at night, when they are simplified by darkness and silence.³⁶

This scene strikingly resembles a scene of the Borgesian story "Sentirse en muerte" (included in his essay "Nueva refutación del tiempo"), which also depicts a nocturnal walk:

the street doors – higher than the lines extending along the walls – seemed made of the same infinite substance as the night... I felt dead, I felt I was an abstract perceiver of the world, struck by an undefined fear imbued with science, or the supreme clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe I had traversed the presumed water of Time; rather I suspected that I possessed the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*.³⁷

A simple comparison will show that both texts depict a nocturnal walk in which the world is conceived as abstract and timeless. In the latter text such an atmosphere leads the protagonist to the feeling that he is an abstract observer of the world and to the sense of the meaning of eternity. This feeling of being an abstract observer of the

³⁶ "Rígida entre las flores la dejé, perfeccionando su desdén por la muerte. Serían las dos de la mañana cuando salí. Afuera, las previstas hileras de casas bajas y de casas de un piso habían tomado ese aire abstracto que suelen tomar en la noche, cuando la sombra y el silencio las simplifican" (*Obras completas* 1: 590).

³⁷ "los portoncitos... parecían obrados en la misma sustancia infinita de la noche... Me sentí muerto, me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo; indefinido temor imbuido de ciencia que es la mejor claridad de la metafísica. No creí; no, haber remontado las presuntivas aguas del Tiempo; más bien me sospeché poseedor del sentido reticente o ausente de la inconcebible palabra *eternidad*" (*Obras completas* 2: 143).

world clearly coincides with Schopenhauer's depiction of the aesthetical observer as a "pure subject of knowledge" or "a clear mirror of the world." Likewise, the sense of the meaning of eternity coincides with the perception of the aesthetical object as an eternal Idea in Schopenhauer's view. Moreover, in both Borgesian texts the scene is associated with death: Teodelina's death in the former and the feeling of being dead in the latter. Thus it is important to elucidate the link between death and such an abstract metaphysical feeling. Schopenhauer deals with this question in his essay "On Man's Need of Metaphysics." Here he claims that it is the awareness of death that leads man to the metaphysical stance: "And its [the will to live] wonder is the more series, as here for the first time it stands consciously face to face with *death*, and besides the finiteness of all existence, the vanity and fruitlessness of all effort force themselves on it more or less."³⁸ In light of this analysis I suggest that the link between the main plot (encountering the Zahir) and the preceding subplot (the lover's death) is as follows: coping with death serves as the psychological springboard of the forthcoming metaphysical viewpoint of the world. It is the same case, so I believe, as in the Borges story "El Aleph": here the mourning of the death of the protagonist's lover, Beatriz Viterbo, foreshadows the vision of the microcosmic Aleph. In this viewpoint Teodelina's death is the background against which a metaphysical encounter takes place: the protagonist perceives a common mundane object, an Argentinean coin, as a microcosm or as an eternal Idea.³⁹

³⁸ "Seine [des Willens zum Leben] Verwunderung ist aber um so ernstlicher, als es hier zum ersten Male mit Bewusstseyn *dem Tode* gegenübersteht, und neben der Endlichkeit alles Daseyns auch die Vergeblichkeit alles Strebens sich ihm mehr oder minder aufdringt" (*Welt 2*: 196).

³⁹ This view might also explain the psychological formation of Teodelina's personality. Borges depicts her as someone who "sought the absolute, like Flaubert, but the absolute in the ephemeral" ["Buscaba lo absoluto, como Flaubert, pero lo absoluto en lo momentáneo"] (*Obras completas 1*: 589). This tendency is the exact opposite of the protagonist's constant obsession of the Zahir.

3.5.) THE MICROCOSMIC-MACROCOSMIC RELATION

As previously mentioned, Alazraki, as well as other Borges scholars, has pointed out that the Zahir is essentially a microcosm, like the Aleph (*Kabbalah* 45). Etymologically, the Greek word 'cosmos' means 'order' and in ancient Greek philosophy it indicated the entire universe. Philosophically, the notion of microcosm indicates that the totality of the universe is entirely reflected in a singular fraction of the universe, so that the whole world is absolutely reflected in a single concrete object.⁴⁰ As to the case of the Zahir, as quoted before the protagonist realizes that his perception of the image of the Zahir is going to subdue his perception of the universe: "...for me, thousands upon thousands of appearances will pass into one; a complex dream will pass into a simple one...When every man on earth thinks, day and night, of the Zahir, which will be dream and which reality, the earth or the Zahir?"⁴¹ Accordingly, Taylor's report (mentioned in Barlach's monograph on the Zahir) depicts a drawing of an infinite Zahir-tiger that was created by a fakir whose initial purpose had been to draw a map of the world in a jail-cell at Nighur: "It was a tiger composed of many tigers, in the most dizzying of ways; it was crisscrossed with tigers, striped with tigers, and contained seas and Himalayas and armies that resembled other tigers."⁴² Correspondingly, in Schopenhauer's aesthetics the haphazard object of contemplation is also perceived as a microcosm. It is isolated from the causal concatenation of other objects and its sole image is being perceived as an eternal Idea, the pure

⁴⁰ In Mandelbrot's mathematical theory, the microcosmic trait applies to the geometrical form called "fractal."

⁴¹"de miles de apariencias pasaré a una; de un sueño muy complejo a un sueño muy simple. Otros soñarán que estoy loco y yo con el Zahir. Cuando todos los hombres de la tierra piensen, día y noche, en el Zahir, ¿cuál sera un sueño y cuál una realidad, la tierra o el Zahir?" (*Obras completas* 1: 595). It is the same case, so I believe, as in the Borgesian story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" where it is written in the postscript that the imaginary planet has finally taken over reality (*Obras completas* 1: 440-43).

⁴²"Ese tigre estaba hecho de muchos tigres, de de vertiginosa manera; lo atravesaban tigres, estaba rayado de tigres, incluía mares e Himalayas y ejércitos que parecían otros tigres" (*Obras completas* 1: 593).

objectification of the cosmic Will. Thus, the whole cosmic Will is being reflected in a single object. Hence Schopenhauer's aesthetical object is, in a strict philosophical sense, a microcosm. I suggest that this is another common denominator of Borges and Schopenhauer: both the Zahir and the aesthetical object are microcosmic objects. And indeed, while Borges's protagonist contemplates about the microcosmic trait of the Zahir he straightforwardly mentions Schopenhauer, alongside Tennyson and the Kabbalists:

Tennyson said that if we could but understand a single flower we might know who we are and what the world is. Perhaps he was trying to say that there is nothing, however humble, that does not imply the history of the world and its infinite concatenation of causes and effects. Perhaps he was trying to say that the visible world can be seen entire in every image, just as Schopenhauer tells us that the Will expresses itself entire in every man and woman. The kabbalists believed that man is a microcosm, a symbolic mirror of the universe; if one were to believe Tennyson, everything would be - everything, even the unbearable Zahir.⁴³

The common basis of Tennyson, Schopenhauer and the Kabbalists is that a concrete object reflects the entire universe. As to Schopenhauer, Borges mentions here his famous view in which our own will-to-live expresses the whole cosmic Will.⁴⁴ This microcosmic-macrocosmic trait actually pertains to the aesthetical object as well, since the object is perceived as an Idea which is the pure objectification of the cosmic Will. And yet what does the microcosmic Zahir reflect? What exactly is the content of its

⁴³ "Dijo Tennyson que si pudiéramos comprender una sola flor sabríamos quiénes somos y qué es el mundo. Tal vez quiso decir que no hay hecho, por humilde que sea, que no implique la historia universal y su infinita concatenación de efectos y causas. Tal vez quiso decir que el mundo visible se da entero en cada representación, de igual manera que la voluntad, según Schopenhauer, se da entera en cada sujeto. Los cabalistas entendieron que el hombre es un microcosmo, un simbólico espejo del universo; todo, según Tennyson, lo sería. Todo, hasta el intolerable Zahir" (*Obras completas* 1: 594-95).

⁴⁴ *Welt* 1: 162.

observation? As mentioned before Borges depicts another microcosmic object in his short story "El Aleph." Here too the protagonist is called "Borges"; here too he mourns his lover's death. After seeing the Aleph "Borges" recalls that

The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror let us say) was considered an infinite thing, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos.⁴⁵

The microcosmic Aleph simultaneously depicts each and every ephemeral object of the universe. On the other hand, the vision of the Zahir exclusively depicts both sides of the Zahir simultaneously, so that "it is as though the vision were itself spherical, with the Zahir rampant in the center."⁴⁶ Hence in contrast to the Aleph, which manifests the entire universe, the Zahir is the only content of the microcosmic Zahir. On other words, the Zahir substitutes, rather than reflects, the universe: in the case of the Zahir the microcosm *becomes* the macrocosm. All in all, it can be deduced that Borges's Zahir (a coin perceived as a universe) and Schopenhauer's aesthetical object (an ephemeral object perceived as an Idea, the pure objectification of the Will) both reflect the Idealistic view that "the verbs *to live* and *to dream* are at every point synonymous."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "El diámetro del Aleph sería de dos o tres centímetros, pero el espacio cósmico estaba ahí, sin disminución de tamaño. Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo" (*Obras completas* 1: 625).

⁴⁶ "más bien ocurre como si la visión fuera esférica y el Zahir campeara en el centro" (*Obras completas* 1: 594).

⁴⁷ "los verbos *vivir* y *soñar* son rigurosamente sinónimos" (*Obras completas* 1: 595). This microcosmic-macrocosmic relation is also reflected in the main plot of *The Zahir*. Here the protagonist's obsession of the coin is reflected by the scene of his dream in which he was a pile of coins guarded by a Gryphon (*Obras completas* 1: 591), as well as by the fantastic story he writes in which the serpent Fafnir eagerly protects the treasure of the Nibelungen (*Obras completas* 1: 592).

Let us conclude the course of our investigation. The aim of the present essay was to demonstrate how Schopenhauer's aesthetics may serve as an observation post to a Borges text. After a synoptical review of the link between Borges and Schopenhauer, I have characterized the essential traits of Schopenhauer's aesthetics, focusing on the process of aesthetical observation. Thereafter, these traits served to elucidate one of Borges's most elusive texts, *The Zahir*. I have analytically shown how Schopenhauer's aesthetical observation, in which the artistic genius observes an ephemeral object and conceives it as an eternal Idea, coincides with the encounter between Borges's protagonist and his common Argentine coin, observed as the eerily unforgettable Zahir. Thus, I believe that Schopenhauer's aesthetics managed to establish a constant and comprehensive non-psychological interpretation of Borges's labyrinthine text. However, my main attempt was not to simply manifest a concrete interpretation to a concrete Borgesian text, claiming for the crown of interpretation in a manner worthy of Macbeth. After all, it was Borges who taught us that an enduring work of art entails the capacity of infinite and malleable ambiguity.⁴⁸ Rather, I will evoke Wittgenstein's notion of "a change of aspect": "the expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged."⁴⁹ Applying this notion to literary criticism, it can be said that in the present study Borges's text was seen from the perspective of Schopenhauer's aesthetics, and the presented interpretation is thus valid only as long as the text is seen from this viewpoint. And maybe this study, a patient labyrinth of thoughts, traces the image of my own face.

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⁴⁸ "La obra que perdura es siempre capaz de una infinita y plástica ambigüedad" (*Obras completas* 2: 76).

⁴⁹ "Der Ausdruck des Aspektwechsels ist der Ausdruck einer *neuen* Wahrnehmung, zugleich mit dem Ausdruck der unveränderten Wahrnehmung" (Wittgenstein *Investigations* 196).

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