

Borges' El Zahir

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Women in Borges' fiction are greatly outnumbered by the male protagonists and characters. In fact, women appear in only thirteen of Borges' sixty short stories, and they are either completely absent or they mainly appear as minor characters.¹ Some of Borges' female characters are not even given a proper name as they are called only by a nickname, such as la Lujanera in "El hombre de la esquina rosada" (Streetcorner Man, 1935), "la mujer de pelo colorado" (Redheaded Woman in "El muerto," The Dead Man, 1949), "la india inglesa" (Story of the Warrior and the Captive, 1949), "la viuda" ("The Widow" in "Juan Muraña," 1970), "La señora mayor" (The Elderly Lady, 1970), or "La viuda Ching, pirata" (The Widow Ching, Lady Pirate, 1935). Borges' female characters are often nameless as in "El duelo" (The Duel, 1970) and the maid in "El Sur" (The South, 1944). Nonetheless, there are some exceptions where women's roles in Borges' fiction are substantial. There are, in fact, a few female characters of Borges that hold a proper name and who coincidentally have a presence, as in "Ulrica" (1975), "La intrusa" (The Intruder, 1941), and Emma Zunz (1949).² "Ulrica", for instance, is a woman who has a romantic encounter with the narrator but in the end, it is revealed that it was only part of an image in the narrator's dream. Juliana's character in, "La intrusa" is a woman murdered by two brothers for the sake of their mutual filial love; and Emma Zunz (1949) a woman who avenges her father's murder and sacrifices her honor to imprison his assassin.³ Some critics, such as Ferrer and others have argued that Borges' unsuccessful and scarce love life is represented by his abused, neglected and objectified female

character as depicted in these short stories.³ Therefore, there are only two female characters in Borges' fiction that are not only central to the story but serve as the conditional source to the story's existence in the structural, thematical and physical level: Beatriz Viterbo in "El Aleph" (The Aleph, 1949) and Teodelina Villar in "El Zahir" (The Zahir, 1949).⁴

Alicia Jurado (409-10), Alejandro Vaccaro (127), Donna Fitzgerald (229), and many others⁵ have examined Borges' life, finding autobiographical themes and parallelisms to his work and its representation of women. Some have affirmed that his short stories are the representation of a Freudian Oedipus complex related to his close maternal relationship and distant paternal one (Vásquez 254-5). Further analysis is based on Borges' long time relationship with Estela Canto⁶, an old friend and acquaintance with whom the Argentinean author had an amorous relationship, and/or on his truncated relationship with Norah Lange. However, Borges himself has affirmed that the absence of women in his work reinforces their essence. (Williamson 72). All these studies have been based on what Umberto Eco calls "empirical authors" and "empirical readers". These analyses study Borges' work, not within its textual own voice and intrinsic logic of signifiers, but within the reader's "own expectations of the text" (Between 68). This kind of reading, states Umberto Eco, is a complex exchange between the proficiency of the reader (the reader's world comprehension) and the kind of proficiency that produces any text, when it is read in a practical manner. The present study, on the other hand, will examine Borges within a deconstructive scope in which the reader plays a crucial role in decoding the text. This interpretation of "El Zahir" is not founded on Jorge Luis Borges'

life, but on what the text and its internal coherence conveys in his portrayal of a female character who is central to the story.

“El Zahir” tells of a man named Borges, using himself as narrator. Borges’ infatuation for Teodelina Villar and her death are closely connected to the protagonist’s accidental encounter with a coin named Zahir. This coin has the power of becoming an obsession for anyone who comes in contact with it. All metaphors in “El Zahir” are connected as a chain of signifiers between two protagonists: Teodelina Villar and El Zahir. Thematically and structurally, “El Zahir” the work, El Zahir –the coin–, Teodelina –the protagonist–, and Borges –the author and narrator– mirror human nature and recreate its inner duality: as creator and destructor and as a source of good and evil.⁷ For clarity, I refer to Borges’ work as “El Zahir” and the coin as El Zahir, without quotations.

In “The Pharmakon”, Jacques Derrida explains how writing repeats itself through history and within the eyes of the reader; in other words, according to Derrida, every reader will recreate the text, designing his/her own meaning and interpretation. Writing, in this sense, acquires a mythical condition of existence that repeats itself end lessly and mimics the core of some occult ambiguous themes (74). In “El Zahir”, this esthetic is perceived throughout the short story. The main character, Teodelina Villar, is the axis of the story that is recounted by the narrative persona Borges. Soon, in the first paragraph, the polysemic nature and ambiguity of “El Zahir” is stated. The narrator’s explanation of El Zahir’s diverse quantity of locations, meanings, names, and its ubiquitous nature, open the question of El Zahir the object and “El Zahir” the *oeuvre*, and its textual and thematic inaccessibility:

(En Guzerat, a fines del siglo XVIII, un tigre fue Zahir; en Java, un ciego de la mesquite de Surakata, a quien lapidaron los fieles; en Persia, un astrolabio que Nadir Shah hizo arrojar al fondo del mar [...] una veta en el mármol de uno de los mil doscientos pilares; en la judería de Tetuán, el fondo de un pozo.) (105)

(In Guzerat, toward the end of the eighteenth century, a tiger was Zahir; in Java, it was a blind man in the Surakarta mosque, a man whom the Faithful stoned; in Persia, an astrolabe which Nadir Shah ordered sunk to the bottom of the sea; in the prisons of Madhi, circa 1892, it was a small compass, wrapped in a strip of turban, which Rudolph Carl von Slatin handled; in the mosque at Córdoba, it was, according to Zotenberg, a vein running through the marble in one of the twelve-hundred columns; in the Jewish quarter of Tetuán, it was the bottom of the well.) (128)

The narrator informs the reader about El Zahir: “En Buenos Aires El Zahir es una moneda común de veinte centavos” (105)—“In Buenos Aires, the Zahir is a common ordinary coin worth twenty centavos (sic)” (128) which clarifies which one of the multiple Zahirs is the protagonist in this specific place where the story unfolds. El Zahir has had multiple forms throughout history along with the power to direct the lives of whoever had encountered it. The different shapes and incarnations of El Zahir are related to the Arab, Muslim and/or Jewish culture, which trailed Christianity’s popularity, and are the four predominant religions of the world. El Zahir has different names and it is personified in different subjects and objects. These changes of denomination are similar to how, historically, deities have had diverse names. Identity, therefore, is one of the themes of this short story questioning it on a number of levels. Matamoros’ comments on

Borges' thematic of identity: "...el múltiple Borges que se desdobra entre joven y ciego, entre público y secreto, entre vivo y muerto, entre olvidado y eterno. Y suma y sigue hasta componer una de las típicas enumeraciones caóticas del escritor..." (221)—“...Borges, the multiple, which duplicates himself between young and blind, public and the private, death and alive, forgotten and eternal. He continues adding this feature in his fiction until composing one of the writer's most typical and chaotic characteristics of his work”⁸

Thematically, both the coin and Teodelina as the two main characters constitute two faces of the same being. El Zahir and Teodelina are indissolubly mimetically and metaphorically linked. The narrator begins the story on November 13th and he obtains El Zahir at dawn on June 7th, the day after the death of Teodelina Villar. The direct relationship between El Zahir and Teodelina is obvious. Both the coin and the woman have engraved the letters N and T; the V of Villar as two Vs inverted and connected and the N and T as the first letter of her name, Teodelina. The coin and the woman coexist as the textual condition of survival within the work as the center of this *histos* or text, and at a different level, within the narrator's own story. At the same time the question of identity is immersed in the idea of Teodelina and El Zahir. Both the coin and the woman seem to be two faces of the same condition: life and death; good and evil are also ingrained in both characters. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, are intertwined in both El Zahir and Teodelina.

The name of Teodelina is also emblematic of a creator, because it carries the name of God as the idea of the Supreme Being, appearing in two different languages in the anagram Teodelina. On one side, as Dove has already observed, Teo is Greek for

God. He also adds that Delina [dēlō in Greek] means to make visible (175). On the other side, I should add two other features related to Teodelina's name: dei is also the Latin meaning of God. The meaning of the suffix "ina" is "related with". In chemical jargon it means "substance related with"; the suffix "ina" also expresses "insistence or intensity". Therefore, the idea of God/Teodelina as the creator, the beginning of the story/history, the pretext and the end of it, is vital in "El Zahir". Hughes has also noted this characteristic with Borges. According to him, Borges' women, in general, incarnate the first step to a revelation, a destiny; more than an object of desire, they are a pretext for the story (35).

Structurally and physically, the short story also states two axes/facets and faces related to the female protagonist. The first paragraph corresponds to a description of the coin: "En Buenos Aires El Zahir es una moneda común de veinte centavos" (105)—"In Buenos Aires, the Zahir is a common ordinary coin worth twenty centavos (sic)" (128). Immediately, in the second paragraph, the name and importance of Teodelina is stated: "El seis de junio murió Teodelina Villar" (105)—"Teodelina Villar died on the sixth of June" (128). Teodelina is the pretext for the story and the foundation of the protagonist's actions. At the same time, Teodelina's last name is formed by the letters V-i-l-l-a-r which is also an anagram for rival. The lexical term rival in noun form is rivalry. Rivalry implies a person, group or organization that competes against another person or group or thing; for instance, the friend and the fiend, the medicine that cures and aids and also the poison that destroys and kills. Teodelina Villar embodies these two opposing forces represented metaphorically through numerous signs and symbols throughout the story.

Another level of dual identity and opposing forces is represented by the narrator/author. Both Borges as narrator and author are connected by a single thread in the text, they hold the same name. Nonetheless, Borges and the author are not the same; while they share a namesake, they are not the same entity. Derrida's ideas in the *Pharmakon*, says that this type of recourse echoes the textual relationship between the father and the logos. Both father and logos are together but opposed at the same time; as a/the coin that has two faces, the text/the world/the logos has two faces as well. The idea of God/the creator and the demon/the destructor are two forces that are separate and together at the same time.⁹ The reader's place is that of discoverer of the mystery. Silvia Kurlat also studies "El Zahir" as an intriguing puzzle: "Justamente, el sentido literal del texto de "El Zahir" oculta múltiples niveles de lectura cuyas claves aparecen dispersas a lo largo del relato" (11)– "In fact, the literal meaning of 'El Zahir' hides multiple reading levels and its hidden clues are dispersed throughout the story"¹⁰

The notion of an opponent with whom it is necessary to fight and defeat is evident within the short story. This veil is only discovered while disentangling the web of the text, as Derrida states. The opponent is not only the idea of the coin that Borges intends to overpower, but, on a different level, it is also the text as the reader's opponent which the reader defeats by recreating it, as Roland Barthes implies in "The Death of the Author" (1967).¹¹

El Zahir is closely related to religious beliefs. In fact, El Zahir is a name that belongs to Islamic religion, which is used to determine the apparent meaning of things. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003), the Bulgarian theorist Slavoj Žižek analyzes the conceptualization and influence of religion historically. It is a fact that Christianity has

been the universal and most popular religion throughout history. According to Žižek, the basic premises of Christianity and its mores have been the domain of “life”. The “Holy Spirit”, as one of the most intriguing metaphysical aspects of Christianity, has permeated the actions and thoughts of the populace making it the largest religion in the world. According to Lacan, nevertheless, the “Holy Spirit” represents the symbolic order, which suspends all flux of emotions, free-thoughts and individual freedom. For the French thinker, religion has permeated the minds and actions of the individual restraining his free will, producing nothing but living zombies.¹² El Zahir also has an influence on whomever encounters it, thus becoming part of their actions, will, and decisions. El Zahir internalizes its power in Borges, the protagonist, and also turns him into a living puppet, indeed, the same way as Žižek states religion does with human beings. Moreover, the force of El Zahir and its influence mark the life and actions of Borges, the narrator, turning his life into a living inferno. The end of the story implies this idea of possession and God: “Quizá yo acabe por gastar El Zahir a fuerza de pensarlo y repensarlo, quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios” (116)–“Perhaps I will manage to wear away the Zahir by force of thinking of it. Perhaps behind the Zahir I shall find God” (137). Alazraki describes the world created by Borges’ fiction as a metaphysical search in which: “una identidad absorbe a la otra, la contiene y la representa” (296)–“one identity absorbs the other, it contains it and represents it”¹³ In this sense, El Zahir has also captivated the narrator’s mind, controlling and embodying it. Man is constituted by feelings, logic, ideas, and experience. These characteristics make possible man’s actions and thoughts. By annulling them, El Zahir forbids all possibility of knowledge or free will. In this sense, El Zahir/religion objectifies and destroys men.

In “El Zahir”, Teo-del-lina is the center of the creation of the written text. This is why her death unfolds the story and the narrator Borges initiates his metaphysical and mystical journey. Teo-del-ina is the reverse of El Zahir the coin. Teodelina is her own rival as Borges, (the writer) is against Borges, (the author-voice) rival. The father, the author, is erased by the logos/son/narrator/text Borges. He, as narrator, appropriates the text, dissolving as the text disappears. Borges loses control of himself as Julia, Teodelina’s sister, suffering from the same obsessive symptoms: “Antes de 1948, el destino de Julia me habrá alcanzado” (116)–”Julia’s fate will have overtaken me before 1948” (137). As the author loses control of the work –which is overtaken by the reader–, the “meaning” of the short story becomes loose; the thread of the *hystos* is dispersed as Borges’ mind. As it is eluded in El Zahir, Islamic hermeneutic interprets the Koran. This interpretation is related to what the sacred text hides and should be deciphered. The short story also parallels this necessity to be deciphered as a text or a micro-cosmos that should be disentangled to be understood, as it has been noted by Shlomy Mualem: “...El Zahir is the only content of the microcosmic Zahir...in the case of El Zahir the microcosm becomes the macrocosm” (134).

In “Plato’s Pharmacy”, Derrida explains the idea of the *Pharmakon* and logos related to the interpretation of a text. According to Derrida, Plato’s *Phaedrus* is a good example of what a text is: “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first-comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game” (63). A text can only be interpreted and deciphered giving the silent signifier a voice or multiple voices. The term *Pharmakon*, Derrida points out, evokes the idea of the etymological meaning of the word, the drug, the medicine, and at the same time the poison. This *Pharmakon* appears

in the body of the discourse in Phaedrus with its multiple meanings. At the same time, El Zahir as the object (the coin) that is given to Borges the day after Teo-del-ina's death has the same function within the text simultaneously as a poison and a medicine. The narrator encounters himself with the recurrent idea of the coin that lures him. He tries to hide it, bury it, lose it, destroy it, compose a tale, think about other coins and visit an analyst but none of these remedies helps. He is not able to forget El Zahir. The coin eternally returns to his memory as an obsession. In his search to abandon El Zahir and its fixation, he finds the study of Barlach about El Zahir's superstition and finally understands the origin of his illness. El Zahir is ubiquitous, powerful, intrudes into the minds of which it is exposed and also is one of the 99 names of God (116). As in the first page of the story, the narrator repeats one of the multiple forms of El Zahir; "a tiger, a magical tiger" (113). Anyone who sees the tiger is never able to forget it. Moreover, the mysterious tiger is drawn by a prisoner obsessed with it inside his cell in a horrific representation of God: "Verdaderamente ha visto al tigre" (113)–"Verily he has looked on the Tiger" (134). Just as the divinity has different names and shapes in different cultures¹⁴, in the same way El Zahir has different faces and enters the individual's mind becoming the axis of their lives. Seeing and possessing El Zahir is similar to seeing God. Forero establishes a comparison between the idea of God as a possession and Borges' story, "El Zahir", "Deutsches Requiem" and "Tigres azules": "...Dios, la locura y la ceguera, que son –en sí mismos- tres efectos de ver o poseer El Zahir en cualquiera de sus manifestaciones" (163)– "...God, madness, blindness which are –in themselves- three effects to see and possess The Zahir in any of its manifestations"¹⁵ The idea of a supreme power is intertwined within the text, El Zahir, Teodelina, and the narrator. El Zahir as a Pharmakon, acts as a

poison and medicine that introduces itself into the body of the discourse, the body of the text, the body of the narrator and emblemizes Teodelina as its alter-ego. Derrida affirms the Pharmakon as a text: “This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be –alternately or simultaneously– beneficent or maleficent” (70). In this sense the story, on diverse levels, has hidden virtues written in cryptic depths and rejecting to be scrutinized or analyzed, creating its own system of references and representations.

The narrator recalls the personality of Teo-del-ina Villar and her yearning for perfection and correction. Teo-del-ina was in a constant mutation and personal transformation physically and emotionally: “Buscaba lo absoluto, como Flaubert, pero lo absoluto en lo momentáneo” (106). “She sought the Absolute, like Flaubert, but the Absolute in the momentary” (129) As in Pío Baroja’s protagonist in *Camino a la perfección* (1911), Teodelina’s search for perfection is not the ultimate representation of this characteristic as in Christian morality. Teodelina, as Felipe Ossorio in Baroja’s novel, looks for perfection in her desire of inner discovery. Teodelina’s constant metamorphoses and changes are born from an interior yearning: “Su vida era ejemplar y, sin embargo, la roía sin tregua una desesperación interior” (106)–“Her life was exemplary, and yet an inner despair unremittingly gnawed her” (129). In “El Zahir”, Teodelina’s identity is the specular image of the mysterious object that Borges is given after her death. As a professional model, Teodelina also represents different versions of herself. Teodelina’s constant changes of physiognomy echo the obsession that Borges encounters with the idea of the coin. The circular shape of “El Zahir” also brings an eternal path of recurrence without an exit. Borges’ persistent, limitless thought also parallels the repetitive thoughts and activities that are determined as punishments in *The*

Divine Comedy (1308). Following Teodelina's wake, Borges, the narrator, receives the coin. He walks aimlessly in alleys and streets only to return to the place where he had left: "Había errado en círculo: ahora estaba a una cuadra del almacén donde me dieron El Zahir" (108)—"I have wandered about in a random circle. I now found myself a block from the wine shop where I had been given the Zahir" (131). The narrator walks in an alley, walking in circles with a circle in his hand. This action makes reference to the coin as a metaphor to the entrance of the inferno, as described in Dante's, *Divine Comedy*. According to the Florentine writer, in the first part of his *opera prima*, Virgilio accompanies him to visit the inferno. The inferno has an alley entrance and its shape is that of an inverted cone, and its base also has a circular shape and no exit. Borges/the narrator also enters an alley and walks the same path in circles paralleling Dante's entrance to the inferno. Sharon Magnarelli notices the relationship of Borges' women and death: "Instead, rather than a life-giving principle, women are depicted in Borges' work in relation to death, violence, and often sacrifice" (142). With the death of Teodelina, the narrator also enters his individual infernal living death emblemized in the coin called El Zahir, which he will never be able to forget.

The numbers at the beginning of the story, 1, 2 and 9, hold Dantescan undertones as well. The number 2 and the date 1929 are encrypted on the coin. The number 2 on the coin indicates the two axes: El Zahir and Teodelina Villar. The year 1929 encrypted on the coin shows the number nine twice. According to Dante, there are nine circles in the inferno. Numbers 1 and 2 added result in 3. The entrance to the inferno is narrated on Canto III (3). Teodelina's death is June the 6th (6/6), the narrator receives El Zahir on June the 7th (6/7). The time passed between the death of Teodelina and Borges' encounter

with El Zahir is 24 hours: “El día siete de junio, a la madrugada llegó a mis manos El Zahir [...] el seis de junio murió Teodelina Villar” (110)–“...on the seventh of June, at dawn, the Zahir fell into my hands [...] Teodelina Villar died on the sixth of June” (128). Dante’s stance in the inferno is exactly 24 hours. The connection between the elapsed times, the encryption on the coin, and the choice of numbers opens the angle of vision and interpretation to the idea of the dystopian infernal state that the narrator enters when finding the coin.¹⁶

The narrator expresses his/her actual state in the first paragraph: “No soy el que era entonces pero aún me es dado recordar; y acaso referir, lo ocurrido. Aún, siquiera parcialmente, soy Borges” (105)–“I am not now the person I was on that day, but still I am able to remember, and perhaps even to relate, what happened. I am still, however partially, Borges” (128). The narrator has also changed and become another person after his encounter with El Zahir; however, he is still able to remember. Having memories is part of the punishment in Dante’s inferno. Only those who are allowed to forget may gain forgiveness and peace; Leteo, the river that has the properties to make people forget, is located in Purgatory (Alghieri 61). The Leteo’s water possesses a particular quality. Whoever drinks from its waters will inevitably forget all the past. This condition allows the individual to have the opportunity to relive a second time in their afterlife, with no memories of the past; therefore, the fact that they forget will erase all sufferings. Nevertheless, “El Zahir’s” narrator is still able to remember. This sole condition situates him in the other part of the afterlife, the worst of all--the inferno. The inscription at the entrance states: “Oh you all that enter here, lose all hope” (Alighieri 25).

Teodelina Villar and her death also hold Dantescan undertones. She is the daughter of a doctor, works as a model, and is described by the narrator as a superfluous and banal woman whose pleasures are those of an arrogant upper class, spoiled young woman. Her yearning for correctness is sought by her sophisticated taste and manners. Teodelina's beliefs are not metaphysical but rather mundane.¹⁷ During the war, she is concerned about fashion: "La guerra le dio mucho que pensar. Ocupado París por los alemanes ¿cómo seguir la moda?" (107)–"How to follow the fashion when Paris was occupied by the Germans?" (129). Her search was founded in the immediate pleasures of life; she held a *carpe-diem* philosophy of life. Teodelina's metamorphoses are both physical in her intimate search for endless masks, and also emotional as a way to escape from her inner self. Teodelina's changes echo the capability that is believed in Christian tradition about God and the Devil's power to transform physically. There are two crucial episodes that precede Teodelina's death: the mention of the cylindrical hat that she buys from a foreigner and the move to the "sinister" apartment on Aráoz Street.¹⁸ These two episodes are connected to the idea of death and evil. The cylinder is shaped like a prism with parallel congruent circular bases, i.e. the bases are circles. This hat, Teodelina later finds, is not part of the Parisian fashion: "...y por consiguiente no eran sombreros sino arbitrarios y desautorizados *caprichos*" (107)–"...and therefore hats were not at all but arbitrary and unauthorized aberrations" (129). The word "capricho" etymologically comes from the Italian word *capriccio*. Gérard Genette's research finds this word in the thirteenth century as "caporiccio" meaning "horripilation" and "escalofríos" formed by the contraction of *capo* (head) and *riccio* (curled) (92). According to the narrator, the hat is a "capricho". The narrator counts this as the first disgrace of a sequence, which ends

with Teodelina's death: "Las desgracias no vienen solas; el doctor Villar tuvo que mudarse a la calle Aráoz" (107)—"Disasters never occur singly: Doctor Villar was forced to move to Calle Aráoz" (129). The name of the street also holds infernal resonances. Aráoz is a Castilianized form of Basque *Araotz*, a town name in Basque country. It is also a topographical name from Basque *ara(n)* which means 'valley' + an unidentified suffix, or alternatively a reduced form of *Aranotz*, from *aran* 'valley' + *otz* 'cold'. Aráoz, then will be the Cold Valley. The first circle in the inferno is described by Dante as follows: "Vero é che 'n su la proda mi trovai de la valle d'abisso dolorosa che 'ntrono accoglie d'infiniti guai" (26)—"Peering to find where I was—in truth, the lip, above the chasm of pain, which holds the din of infinite grief, a valley so dark and deep" (27). Therefore, Teodelina and her death are closely related to "El Zahir" and its obscure powers.

Within the narration, both Teodelina and El Zahir are connected and, as suggested by the text, are similar. Both the woman and the object entail the structure and the theme of the short story. The effect of both the woman and the coin, in the narrator's insight, are crucial and similar. Teodelina's death precedes the buying of the cylindrical hat and moving to the "sinister" apartment on Aráoz street. The narrator recounts: "Teodelina Villar cometió el solecismo de morir en pleno Barrio Sur" (107)—"Teodelina Villar committed the solecism of dying in the southern suburbs" (129). In prescriptive grammar, a solecism is named as a grammatical mistake, absurdity, or a non-standard usage. It is perceived as an error. Her death was an "error of order". Margarita Saona states that Teodelina's death highlights the narrator's loss of his object of love, which is substituted by El Zahir. In fact, immediately after Teodelina's death the narrator "errs" with no target: "Había errado en círculo..." (108). The replacement of Teodelina for the

Zahir creates an error or an unsolved problem such as in Math. Solving equations by substitution requires substituting a known variable from one equation, for the unknown variable of a different equation. In this case both variables are unknown, which results in an unsolved problem, error or “an impossible equation.”

During Teodelina’s wake the narrator remarks that she was rejuvenated by twenty years. Her different faces or masks are seen within the hours of her wake. The several “versions” of Teodelina appear one after the other: “Mas o menos pensé: ninguna versión de esa cara que tanto me inquietó será la última, ya que pudo ser la primera” (108).¹⁹ “I thought, more or less, thus: no version of this face, which has so unsettled me, will be as memorable as the one I saw; better than it be the last, especially since it could have been the first” (130). The impact of the coin in different times in history, as stated by the narrator, has also created different versions of the peoples’ lives that it has touched. A coin physically has two faces. However, this particular coin’s impact also results in creating several versions of the story. Not only does Teodelina suffer transformations, but the story’s narrator also. The coin symbolizes the future and the non-future. The condemnation is represented by the circular shape of the story, the coin, and even the coin’s materialization of the narrator in dreams: “Dormí tras tenaces cavilaciones, pero soñé que yo era las monedas que custodiaba un grifo” (110)—“I fell asleep after tenacious caviling, but dreamt I was a heap of gold coin guarded by a griffin” (132). This same story, or the myth of El Zahir, exists within a number of narrations that are mentioned by the narrator: “Pensé que no hay moneda que no sea símbolo de las monedas que sin fin resplandecen en la historia y la fábula” (108)—“It occurred to me that every coin in the world is the symbol of all the coins that forever glitter in history and in

fable” (130). The mention of Caronte, Belisario, Judas, Laís, Isaac Laquedem, Firdusi, Ahab, Bloom, Louis XVI in relation to the coins that were crucial in their lives, have a connection among them. These are historical and fictional characters with a common link related to the/a coin. These historical characters are mentioned commonly in reference to those who are unthankful to their benefactors. Coincidentally, the ninth, last and narrower circle in Dante’s inferno is destined to those who have been ungrateful and who have returned evil when they have received goodwill. In fact, two of these names are also in Dante’s opera prima: Caronte and Judas.

The narrator leaves Teodelina’s wake at 2:00 am to wander the streets and on a corner he enters a bar where he finds two men playing “el truco” (110).²⁰ The card game called “el truco”, “the trick” has rules to specifically trick or fool the opponent using a number of gestures. The maximum numbers to win this card game are 6 and 7, or 6 and 6. Those two sets of numbers coincide with the days of Teodelina’s death and the day. Teodelina’s death is June the 6th (6/6), the narrator receives El Zahir on June the 7th (6/7): “El día siete de junio, a la madrugada llegó a mis manos El Zahir [...] el seis de junio murió Teodelina Villar” (110)–“...on the seventh of June, at dawn, the Zahir fell into my hands [...] Teodelina Villar died on the sixth of June” (128). Tricking, in this game, is the only way to win. Players will try to deceit the other players in order to score points.²¹ El Zahir’s elusive meaning holds the same rules of this game. Andrés Forero have found numerous metaphors and hidden clues, similar to El Zahir in three other short stories by Borges: “Deutsches Requiem,” “Tigres azules,” and “El libro de arena.” According to Forero, El Zahir rejects the deciphering of its meaning: “El misterio del Zahir en su forma de moneda y de libro de arena está fundado en que ninguno de los dos se deja descifrar”

(162)–”The mystery of the Zahir in its shape of coin or book of sand is founded in the fact that none of them are decipherable”²². Not only the meaning of El Zahir escapes us, but it also becomes an obsession for the narrator and the reader in the form of an inescapable curse. One of the multiple metaphors and clues of El Zahir is given also at the bar, where the narrator receives (is the recipient of) the coin that will bewitch him for the rest of his life. At this bar, the narrator orders a “caña de naranja” (orange liquor), and in his monetary change he receives El Zahir. A spell is cast on him and the “caña de naranja.” Significantly, in Latvian English, one of the multiple meanings of “naranja,” is “to damn” and, in this sense, possess “a spell” such as El Zahir.

Teodelina’s character incarnates the ineffable and inexorable repetition of the world and its representations of good and evil such as El Zahir: “El Zahir es la sombra de la Rosa y la rasgadura del Velo” (115)–”The Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil” (137). This phrase, mentioned towards the end of the story, entails decoding the idea of the occult meaning of El Zahir. The mention of a Rose –in capitalized letters– is also crucial. The word ‘rose’ has several meanings and it is full of significations, as in Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980). In Eco’s most probable known work of fiction, it is indicated at the beginning of the novel: “...and signs and the signs of the signs are used only when we are lacking things” (The name 8). This lack of a real, steady, and single unique final signifier –due to multiple meanings–, leads the reader to intrigue. In “El Zahir,” this same characteristic reveals the hidden and multiple meanings of the coin as the central idea in the story. El Zahir is not only one of the many representations of the “universe” (116) as the narrator affirms, but also of the eternal duality of the human condition; both faces of the same entity, of the same persona as the

opposition between writing and speaking, Teodelina and Rival (Villar), two opponents battling in different levels and arenas, textually (structurally there is an opposition between Borges narrator and Borges as the author of the short story); inter-textually (the story is in dialog with Derrida's idea of the *Pharmakon* and the debate between writing and speaking); ontologically (between the divinity and its antithesis, the creator and the destructor); life and death (between good and evil); and lastly the reader as the creator and destructor (creator of a new work and destructor of the superficial reading—empirical reading). Patrick Dove notices how *El Zahir* represents two forces: “On the other hand, with *El Zahir*, the absolute is the simultaneous presentation of what we ordinarily perceive as opposing sides or faces.” (178). The ending of the story intertwines all of these opposing ideas: “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” (116)—“I associate that judgment with the report that the Sufis, attempting to lose themselves in God, repeat their own name or the 99 names of the divinity until they lose all meaning. I long to tread the same path” (137). The naming of God and its 99 holy names is the many forms of good linked with evil, echoing the nine circles of the inferno along with the number nine repeated twice. The conjunction of these two forces will inevitably repeat itself throughout history as *El Zahir*, with no end or hope of escaping its humane destiny.

As stated by several critics, women in Borges are more an absence than a presence. In “*El Zahir*”, nevertheless, the female protagonist is not only the pretext for the story, but the core and the center of this short story's universe. Teodelina Villar constitutes the physical and the structural foundation for “*El Zahir's*” existence as a text

and as a reflection, both physical and mental, of our fragile and vulnerable human condition.

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¹ Magnarelli and E.D. Carter, Jr. consider only nine of the total of thirteen Borges' women characters. I coincide with Alicia Jurado who includes all Borges' female

characters in her article “La mujer en la literatura de Borges” (1999) even those that appear briefly in his short stories

Notes

¹ Sharon Magnarelli and Dale Carter, Jr. consider only nine of the total of thirteen Borges’ women characters. I coincide with Alicia Jurado who includes all Borges’ female characters in her article “La mujer en la literatura de Borges” (1999) even those that appear briefly in his short stories. Carter, Dale. *Women in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges*. *Pacific Coast Philology* 14 (1979) 13. Print.

² Herbert Brant affirms that “El muerto” y “La intrusa” are examples of the “common triangular relationship among the characters”, while Edna Aizenberg argues that “Emma Zunz” is exceptional because it shows a female character who is powerful. She affirms that this feature is related to Zunz’ Jewish origin: “Borges creates a protagonist whose assertive femaleness cannot be understood without recourse to her Jewish mysticism” (11). Brant, Herbert. “The Queer Use of Communal Women in Borges’ ‘El muerto’ and ‘La intrusa.’” *Hispanófila* 125 (1999) 38-50. Print. Aizenberg, Edna. “Feminism and Kabbalism: Borges’s (sic) ‘Emma Zunz.’” *Crítica Hispánica* 15.2 (1993) 11-19. Print.

³ Bella Brodzki has already noticed the relationship between the metaphors of the feminine in Borges that are used literarily in mystical and metaphysical themes, while Patrick Dove analyzes “El Zahir” within the “literary treatment of the image”, which he affirms does not have an equivalent but only a form or a manner to appear. (169) Brodzki, Bella. “Borges and the Idea of Woman.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 36-2 (1990): 149-66. Print.

⁴ Bella Brodzki has already noticed the relationship that Beatriz Viterbo is central to the “The Aleph” structural and thematical axis. (154)

⁵ Margarita Saona (69-71), Andrés Forero (156), Genaro Bell-Villada (224) HumbertoNúñez (371) Balderston (115) Alberto Moreiras (133), Rafael Olea Franco (52) Bell-Villada, Genaro. *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art*. Austin. Austin: U of Texas P, 1999. Print. Núñez Faraco, Humberto. "The theme of lovesickness in 'El Zahir.'" *Variaciones Borges* 14 (2002): 115-55. Print. Balderston, Daniel. "Beatriz Viterbo c'est moi': Angular Vision in Estela Canto's Borges a contraluz." *Variaciones Borges* 1 (1996): 133-39. Print. Moreiras, Alberto. "Borges y Estela Canto: La sombra de una dedicatoria." *JILS* 5.1 (1993): 131-46. Print. Olea-Franco, Rafael. *El otro Borges. El primer Borges*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993. Print.

⁶ In her book *Borges a contraluz* (1989), Estela Canto states that Borges' mother disapproved their relationship. Canto, Estela: *Borges a contraluz*. Mexico: Espasa Calpe, 1989. Print.

⁷ The reader cannot assume that the narrator, Borges is Jorge Luis Borges.

⁸ The translation is mine.

⁹ As it is represented in José Saramago's last novel, *Cain* (1999), and analyzed in my forthcoming review of this work in *Hispania*. In that review, I contend that in Cain's narrative, God and Satan are the two sides of the same entity. God in this work is portrayed as a creation of man's own fears and weaknesses who produces his own "imperfect Gods". Fernández-Babineaux, María. "Caín." *Hispania*. 94.3 (2011): 710. Print.

¹⁰ The translation is mine.

¹¹ Barthes proposes to analyze the work as a neutral entity without identity, but specially the identity of the author. According to Barthes the author dies and loses all authority

when the reader recreates the text. Symbols, metaphors and figures within the work produce this rupture inside the text losing the voice of the empirical author and entering its author death.

¹² Nietzsche also refers to religion in his work *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche discusses the idea of Christian values and describes how according to Christian ideology strength and wisdom are negative attributes, while submissiveness and humbleness are positive values. This moral, according to the German thinker interferes with human capacity to think freely creating “slaves”. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Horace B. Samuel. New York: Penguin Books, 1887. Print.

¹³ The translation is mine.

¹⁴ For instance, Allah, Brahma, Buda are names of God. In Judaism God also has several names: Tetragrammaton, Yaweh, Adonai.

¹⁵ The translation is mine.

¹⁶ For Margarita Saona the year 1929 corresponds to Norah Lange’s definite rejection to Borges; therefore, it is a representation of his depressed state (162), while for Jean Franco it shows Borges’ “political death” (127). Franco, Jean. “The Utopia of a Tired Man.” *Critical Passions. Selected Essays*. Eds. Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman. Durham: Duke, 1999. 327-65. Print.

¹⁷According to René De Costa, Teodelina’s banal personality represents the mediocrity of a middle class Argentinian woman. Holly Cadena, on the other hand, believes that Teodelina’s superficiality is a good example of the ironic component in this short story. De Costa, René. *Humor in Borges*. Detroit: Wayne State UP: 2000. Print. Cadena, Holly. “Lo absurdo somos nosotros: el humor en los personajes de Borges.” *Bulletin of*

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¹⁸ Patrick Dove states that Borges, as a peripheral writer does not adhere to the conventionality of a sign: "...we could say that the peripheral writer is the one who calls our attention to the finitude of the sign, or to the fact that a "hat" is not a hat, and that certain sacred philosophemes of the Western tradition – such as sign and the proper- are in fact based on the forgetting of convention..." (183)

¹⁹ There are a number of works that have represented evil with different faces. Two of the most famous literary representations are *Dorian Gray* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In Christian tradition it is believed that the devil also appears with several masks and faces as stated in the sacred book of Christians, the Bible. Wilde, Oscar. *Dorian Gray's Portrait*. Canada: Random House INC, 1890. Print. Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. New York: Scholastic INC, 1886. Print.

²⁰ Truco is a game originating in Spain of Arab tradition.

²¹ This move is called "Deutreada" and in general is not very effective to win the game

²² The translation is mine