



## THE ZAHIR

**Jorge Luis Borges**

In Buenos Aires the Zahir is a common twenty-centavo coin into which a razor or penknife has scratched the letters N T and the number two; the date stamped on the face is 1929. (In Gujarat, at the end of the eighteenth century, Zahir was a tiger; in Java a blind man in the Sukarta mosque who was stoned by the faithful; in Persia, an astrolabe that Nadir Shah ordered thrown into the sea; in the prisons of Mahdi, in 1892, a small compass, wrapped in a shred of cloth from a turban that Rudolf Karl von Slatin touched; in the synagogue of Cordoba, according to Zotenberg, a vein in the marble of one of the twelve hundred pillars; in the Jewish quarter of Tetuan, the bottom of a well.) Today is the thirteenth of November; 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.

On June 6, Teodolina Villar died. Back in 1930, photographs of her had littered the pages of worldly magazines; that ubiquity may have had something to do with the fact that she was thought quite pretty, although not all the pictures of her unconditionally supported that

hypothesis. Furthermore, Teodolina Villar was less concerned with beauty than with perfection. The Hebrews and the Chinese codified every human situation: the Mishnah tells us that beginning at sunset on the Sabbath, a tailor may not go into the street carrying a needle; the Book of Rites informs us that a guest upon receiving his first glass of wine must assume a grave demeanor; receiving the second, a respectful, happy air. The discipline that Teodolina Villar imposed upon herself was analogous, though even more painstaking and detailed. Like Talmudists and Confucians, she sought to make every action irreproachably correct, but her task was even more admirable and difficult than theirs, for the laws of her creed were not eternal, but sensitive to the whims of Paris and Hollywood. Teodolina Villar would make her entrances into orthodox places, at the orthodox hour, with orthodox ornaments, and with orthodox world-weariness but the world-weariness, the adornments, the hour and the places would almost immediately pass out of fashion, and so come to serve (upon the lips of Teodolina Villar) for the very epitome of kitsch. She sought the absolute, like Flaubert, but the absolute in the momentary. Her life was exemplary, and yet an inner desperation constantly gnawed at her. She passed through endless metamorphoses, as though fleeing from herself; her coiffure and the color of her hair were famously unstable, as were her smile, her skin, and the slant of her eyes. From 1932 on, she was studiously slim. . . The war gave her much to think about. With Paris occupied by the Germans, how was one to follow fashion? A foreigner she has always had her doubts about dared to take advantage of her good will by selling her a number of cylindrical chapeaux. Within a year, it was revealed that those horrors had never been worn in Paris, and consequently they were not hats, but arbitrary, unacceptable whims. Dr. Villar had to move to Araoz Street and his daughter's image began to adorn advertisements for face creams and automobiles. Face creams she once used profusely, automobiles she no longer had! Teodolina knew that the proper exercise of her art required a great fortune; she opted to retreat rather than surrender. And besides - it pained her to compete with mere insubstantial girls. The sinister apartment on Araoz, however, was too much to bear; on June 6, Teodolina Villar committed the solecism of dying in the middle of Barrio Sur. Shall I confess that, moved by the sincerest of Argentine passions, snobbery, I was in love with her, and that her death actually brought tears to my eyes? Perhaps the reader has already suspected that.

At wakes, the progress of corruption allows the dead person's body to recover its former aspect. At one point in the confused night of June 6, Teodolina Villar magically became what she had been twenty years before; her features recovered the authority of that arrogance money, youth, the awareness of being the *creme de la creme*, restrictions, a lack of imagination, and stolidity can give. My thoughts were no more or less: No version of that face that has so disturbed me shall ever be as memorable as this one; it's just as well that it was the last, as it could just as well have been the first. I left her lying stiff among the flowers perfecting her contempt for death. It was about two o'clock, I guess, when I stepped into the street. Outside, the predictable ranks 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. Drunk with an

almost impersonal pity, I wandered through the streets. On the corner of Chile and Tacauri I spotted an open bar-and-general-store. In that establishment, to my misfortune, three men were playing truco. In the rhetorical figure known as oxymoron, the adjective applied to a noun seems to contradict that noun. Thus, Gnostics spoke of a "dark light"; and alchemists of a "black sun". Departing from my last visit to Teodolina Villar and drinking a glass of cheap gin in a corner bar-and-grocery store was a kind of oxymoron: its very vulgarity and accessibility were what tempted me. (The fact that men were playing cards in the place increased the contrast.) I asked the owner for an orange gin; with the change I was given the Zahir; I looked at it for an instant, and then walked outside into the street, perhaps with the beginnings of a fever. 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. I thought of Charon's obolus; the alms that Belisarius begged; Judas's thirty pieces of silver; the drachmas of the courtesan Lais; the ancient coin proffered by one of the Ephesian sleepers; the bright coins of the wizard in the 1001 Nights, which turned into disks of paper; Isaac Laquedem's inexhaustible denarius; the sixty thousand silver coins, one for every verse of an epic, which Firdusi returned to a king because they were not gold; the gold doubloon nailed by Ahab to the mast; Leopold Bloom's unreversible florin; the Louis that betrayed the fleeing Louis XVI near Varennes. As though in a dream, the thought that in any coin one may read those famous connotations seemed to me of vast, inexplicable importance. I wandered, with increasingly rapid steps, through the deserted streets and plazas. Weariness halted me at a corner. My eyes came to rest on a weathered wrought-iron fence; behind it I saw the black-and-white tiles of the porch of La Concepción. I had wandered in a circle; I was just one block from the bar where I'd been given the Zahir.

I turned the corner; the dark facade at the far end of the street showed me that the establishment had closed. Sleepless, possessed, almost happy, I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since any coin (a twenty centavo piece, for instance) is, in truth, a panoply of all possible futures. Money is abstract, I said over and over, money is future time. It can be an evening just outside the city, or a Brahms melody, or maps, or chess, or coffee, or the words of Epictetus, which teach the contempt of gold; it is a Proteus more changeable than the Proteus of the Isle of Pharos. It is unforeseeable time, Bergsonian time, not the hard, solid time of Islam or the Portico.

Adherents of determinism deny that in the world there is only one possible event, and that an event which could have happened; a coin symbolizes our free will. (I did not suspect that these "thoughts" were an artifice against the Zahir and a first manifestation of a demoniacal power.) After long and tenacious musings, I at last fell asleep, but I dreamed that I was the pile of coins guarded by a gryphon.

The next day I decided I'd been drunk, I also decided to free myself of the coin that had so affected me. I looked at it; there was nothing particularly distinctive about it, except those

scratches. Burying it in the garden or hiding it in a corner of the library would have been the best thing to do, but I wanted to escape its orbit altogether, and so preferred to lose it. I went neither to the Basilica del Pilar that morning nor to the cemetery; I took a subway to Constitución Station and from Constitución to San Juan and Boedo. On an impulse, I got off at Urquiza; I walked toward the west and south; I turned left and right, with studied randomness, at several corners, and on a street that looked to me like all the others I went into the first tavern I came to, ordered a gin, and paid with the Zahir. I half closed my eyes behind the dark lenses of my spectacles, and managed not to see the numbers on the houses or the name of the street. That night, I took a sleeping pill and slept soundly.

Until the end of June I distracted myself by composing a tale of fantasy. The tale contains two or three enigmatic circumlocutions: "water of the sword", it says, instead of blood, and "bed of the serpent", for gold, and is written in the first person. The narrator is an ascetic who has renounced all commerce with mankind and lives on a moor. (The name of the place is Gnitahidr.) Because of the simplicity and innocence of his life, he is judged by some to be an angel; that is a charitable sort of exaggeration, because no one is free of sin. He himself (to take the example nearest at hand) has cut his father's throat, though it is true that his father was a famous wizard who had used his magic to usurp an infinite treasure for himself.

Protecting this treasure from mad human greed is the mission to which he has devoted his life; day and night he stands guard over it. Soon, perhaps too soon, that watchfulness will come to an end: the stars have told him that the sword that will cut him off forever has already been forged. (Gram is the name of the sword.) In an increasingly tortured style, the narrator praises the luster and flexibility of his body; one paragraph offhandedly mentions "scales"; another says that the treasure he watches over is of red rings and gleaming gold. At the end, we realize that the ascetic is the serpent Fafnir and the treasure on which the creature lies coiled is the gold of the Nibelungen. The appearance of Sigurd abruptly ends the story.

I have said that composing that piece of trivial nonsense (in the course of which I interpolated, with pseudo erudition, a line or two from the Fafnismal) enabled me to put the coin out of my mind. There were nights when I was so certain I'd be able to forget it that I would willfully remember it. The truth is, I abused those moments; stating to recall turned out to be much easier than stopping. It was futile to tell myself that that abominable nickel disk was no different from the infinite other, inoffensive disks that pass from hand to hand every day. Moved by that reflection, I attempted to think about another coin, but I couldn't. I also recall another (frustrated) experiment that I performed with Chilean five-and-ten centavo pieces and a Uruguayan two-centavo piece. On July 16, I acquired a pound sterling; I didn't look at it all that day, but that night (and others) I placed it under a magnifying glass and studied it in the light of a powerful electric lamp. Then I made a rubbing of it. The brilliance and the dragon and St. George availed me naught; I could not rid myself of my *idée fixe*.

In August, I decided to consult a psychiatrist. I did not confide the entire absurdity of the story to him; I told him I was tormented by insomnia and that often I could not free my mind of an object, any random object, a coin, say. A short time later, in a bookshop on Calle Sarmiento, I exhumed a copy of Julius Barlach's *Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahirsage* (Breslau, 1899).

In that book was a description of my illness. The introduction said that the author proposed to "gather into a single manageable octavo volume every existing document that bears upon the superstition of the Zahir, including four articles from the Habicht archives and the original manuscript of Philip Meadows Taylor's report on the subject". Belief in the Zahir is of Islamic ancestry, and dates, apparently, to sometime in the eighteenth century. (Barlach impugns the passages that Zotenberg attributes to Abul-Feddah.) In Arabic, "Zahir" means visible, evident; in that sense, it is one of the ninety-nine names of God; in Muslim countries, the masses use the word for "beings or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually drives people mad." Its first undisputed witness was the Persian polymath and dervish Lutf Ali Azur; in the corroborative pages of the biographical encyclopaedia titled *Temple of Fire*, Ali Azur relates that in a certain school in Shiraz there was a copper astrolabe "constructed in such a way that any man who looked upon it once could think of nothing else, so that the king commanded that it be thrown into the deepest depths of the sea, in order that men might not forget the universe." Meadows Taylor's account is somewhat more extensive; the author served the Nizam of Hyderabad, and composed the famous novel *Confessions of a Thug*. In 1832, on the outskirts of Bhuj, Taylor heard the following uncommon expression used to signify madness or saintliness: "Haber visto al Tigre" (Verily he has looked on the tiger) He was told that the reference was to a magic tiger that was the perdition of all who saw it, even from a great distance, for they continued to think of it till the end of their days. Someone mentioned that one of those unfortunates had fled to Mysore, where he had painted the figure of the tiger in a palace.

Years later, Taylor visited the prisons of that kingdom; in the jail at Nithur, the Governor showed him a cell on whose floor, walls and vaulted ceiling a Moslem fakir had designed (in fantastic colors, which time, rather than erasing, refined) of an infinite tiger. It was a tiger composed of many tigers, in the most dizzying of ways; it was crisscrossed with tigers, striped with tigers and included seas and Himalayas and armies that resembled other tigers. The painter had died many years before, in that same cell; he had come from Sind or perhaps Gujarat and his initial purpose had been to draw a mapamundi. Of that purpose there remained some vestiges within the monstrous image. Taylor told this story to Muhammad al-Yemeni, of Fort William; al-Yemeni said that there was no creature in the world that did not tend toward becoming a Zaheer [1], but that the All-Merciful does not allow two things to be a Zaheer at the same time, since only one is capable of entrancing multitudes. He said that there is always a Zaheer and in the Age of Ignorance it was the idol called Yahuk, and then a prophet from Khorsasan who wore a veil studded with precious

stones or a mask of gold.[2] He also noted that God is inscrutable.

Over and over I read Barlach's Monograph. I cannot sort out my emotions; I recall my desperation when I realized that nothing could any longer save me, the inward relief of knowing that I was not to blame for my misfortune, the envy I felt for those whose Zaheer was not a coin but a slab of marble or a tiger. How easy it is not to think of a tiger, I recall thinking. I also recall the remarkable uneasiness I felt when I read this paragraph: "One commentator of the Gulshan i Raz states that 'he who has seen the Zaheer soon shall see the Rose' and quotes a line of poetry interpolated into Attar's Asrar Nama (The Book of Things Unknown): "the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil."

On the night of Teodolina's wake, I had been surprised not to see amongst those present Sra. Abascal, her younger sister. In October, a friend of hers said to me:

"Poor Julita, she became so strange and they interned her in the Bosch. How she must burden those nurses who spoon-feed her! She goes on and on about that coin, just like Morena Sackmann's chauffeur."

Time, which softens memories, only makes the memory of the Zahir 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 upon the other; rather it is as though the vision were spherical and the Zahir flutters in the center. Whatever is not the Zahir appears to me filtered and distant: The scornful image of Teodolina, physical pain. Tennyson said that if we could but understand a single flower we would 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 meant that there is no deed, however humble, that does not imply universal history and its infinite succession of effects and causes. Perhaps he meant that the visible world is complete in each representation, just as Schopenhauer tells us that the Will expresses itself entire in every person. The Kabbalists believed that man is a microcosm, a symbolic mirror of the universe; as would everything, according to Tennyson. Everything, even the unbearable Zahir.

Before the year 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 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 maintain that the pain of an anesthetized patient whose skull is being opened is terrible. I will no longer perceive the universe, I will perceive the Zahir. According to Idealist doctrine the verbs "to live" and "to dream" are rigorously synonymous; as for me, thousands of appearances will become one; a very complex dream into a simple one. Others will dream that I am mad, while I dream of the Zahir. When every

person on earth thinks, day and night, of the Zahir, which will be dream and which reality, the earth or the Zahir?

In the deserted hours of the night I am still able to walk through the streets. Dawn often surprises me upon a bench in the Plaza Garay, thinking (or trying to think) about that passage in the Asrar Nama where it is said that the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil. I link that pronouncement to this fact: 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 I will succeed in wearing away the Zahir by thinking and re-thinking about it; perhaps behind the coin is God.

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For Wally Zenner

[1] Taylor writes the word this way.

[2] Barlach observes that Yaúq figures in Alcorán (LXXI, 23) and that the prophet is Al-Moqanna (the Veiled One) and that no one, except Philip Meadows Taylor's surprising correspondent, has associated them with the Zahir.



**Sources:**

Jorge Luis Borges. "The Zahir." *The Aleph and Other Stories*. 1949.

**Images:**

Belen Gache. b-zahir. Online image posted by [www.psychoeconomy.org](http://www.psychoeconomy.org).