

*THE ZAHIR*

IN Buenos Aires the Zahir is an ordinary coin worth twenty centavos. The letters N T and the number 2 are scratched as if with a razor-blade or penknife; 1929 is the date on the obverse. (In Guzerat, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Zahir was a tiger; in Java, a blind man from the Mosque of Surakarta whom the Faithful pelted with stones; in Persia, an astrolabe which Nadir Shah caused to be sunk to the bottom of the sea; in the Mahdi's prisons, along about 1892, it was a little compass which Rudolf Carl von Slatin touched, tucked into the fold of a turban; in the Mosque of Cordova, according to Zotenberg, it was a vein in the marble of one of the twelve-hundred pillars; in the Tetuan ghetto, it was the bottom of a well.) Today is the thirteenth of November; the Zahir came into my possession at dawn on June seventh. I am no longer the "I" of that episode; but it is still possible for me to remember what happened, perhaps even to tell it. I am still, however incompletely, Borges.

Clementina Villar died on the sixth of June. Around 1930, her pictures were clogging the society magazines: perhaps it was this ubiquity that con-

tributed to the legend that she was extremely pretty, although not every portrait bore out this hypothesis unconditionally. At any rate, Clementina Villar was interested less in beauty than in perfection. The Hebrews and the Chinese codified every conceivable human eventuality; it is written in the *Mishnah* that a tailor is not to go out into the street carrying a needle once the Sabbath twilight has set in, and we read in the *Book of Rites* that a guest should assume a grave air when offered the first cup, and a respectfully contented air upon receiving the second. Something of this sort, though in much greater detail, was to be discerned in the uncompromising strictness which Clementina Villar demanded of herself. Like any Confucian adept or Talmudist, she strove for irreproachable correctness in every action; but her zeal was more admirable and more exigent than theirs because the tenets of her creed were not eternal, but submitted to the shifting caprices of Paris or Hollywood. Clementina Villar appeared at the correct places, at the correct hour, with the correct appurtenances and the correct boredom; but the boredom, the appurtenances, the hour and the places would almost immediately become passé and would provide Clementina Villar with the material for a definition of cheap taste. She was in search of the Absolute, like Flaubert; only hers was an Absolute of a moment's duration. Her life was exemplary, yet she was ravaged unremittingly by an inner despair. She was forever experimenting with new metamorphoses, as though trying to get away from herself; the color of her hair

and the shape of her coiffure were celebratedly unstable. She was always changing her smile, her complexion, the slant of her eyes. After thirty-two she was scrupulously slender . . . The war gave her much to think about: with Paris occupied by the Germans, how could one follow the fashions? A foreigner whom she had always distrusted presumed so far upon her good faith as to sell her a number of cylindrical hats; a year later it was divulged that those absurd creations *had never been worn in Paris at all!* – consequently they were not hats, but arbitrary, unauthorized eccentricities. And troubles never come singly: Dr. Villar had to move to Aráoz Street, and his daughter's portrait was now adorning advertisements for cold cream and automobiles. (The cold cream that she abundantly applied, the automobiles she *no longer* possessed.) She knew that the successful exercise of her art demanded a large fortune, and she preferred retirement from the scene to halfway effects. Moreover, it pained her to have to compete with giddy little nobodies. The gloomy Aráoz apartment was too much to bear: on the sixth of June Clementina Villar committed the solecism of dying in the very middle of the Southern district. Shall I confess that I – moved by that most sincere of Argentinian passions, snobbery – was enamored of her, and that her death moved me to tears? Probably the reader has already suspected as much.

At a wake, the progress of corruption brings it about that the corpse reassumes its earlier faces. At some stage of that confused night of the sixth,

Clementina Villar was magically what she had been twenty years before: her features recovered that authority which is conferred by pride, by money, by youth, the awareness of rounding off a hierarchy, by lack of imagination, by limitations, by stolidity. Somehow, I thought, no version of that face which has disturbed me so will stay in my memory as long as this one; it is right that it should be the last, since it might have been the first. I left her rigid among the flowers, her disdain perfected by death. It must have been about two in the morning when I went away. Outside, the predictable rows of one- and two-story houses had taken on the abstract appearance that is theirs at night, when darkness and silence simplify them. Drunk with an almost impersonal piety, I walked through the streets. At the corner of Chile and Tacuarí I saw an open shop. And in that shop, unhappily for me, three men were playing cards.

In the figure of speech called oxymoron a word is modified by an epithet which seems to contradict it: thus, the Gnostics spoke of dark light, and the alchemists of a black sun. For me it was a kind of oxymoron to go straight from my last visit with Clementina Villar to buy a drink at a bar; I was intrigued by the coarseness of the act, by its ease. (The contrast was heightened by the circumstance that there was a card game in progress.) I asked for a brandy. They gave me the Zahir in my change. I stared at it for a moment and went out into the street, perhaps with the beginnings of a fever. I reflected that every coin in the world is a symbol of those famous

coins which glitter in history and fable. I thought of Charon's obol; of the obol for which Belisarius begged; of Judas' thirty coins; of the drachmas of Laïs, the famous courtesan; of the ancient coin which one of the Seven Sleepers proffered; of the shining coins of the wizard in the 1001 Nights, that turned out to be bits of paper; of the inexhaustible penny of Isaac Laquedem; of the sixty thousand pieces of silver, one for each line of an epic, which Firdusi sent back to a king because they were not of gold; of the doubloon which Ahab nailed to the mast; of Leopold Bloom's irreversible florin; of the louis whose pictured face betrayed the fugitive Louis XVI near Varennes. As if in a dream, the thought that every piece of money entails such illustrious connotations as these, seemed to me of huge, though inexplicable, importance. My speed increased as I passed through the empty squares and along the empty streets. At length, weariness deposited me at a corner. I saw a patient iron grating and, beyond, the black and white flagstones of the Concepcion. I had wandered in a circle and was now a block away from the store where they had given me the Zahir.

I turned back. The dark window told me from a distance that the shop was now closed. In Belgrano Street I took a cab. Sleepless, obsessed, almost happy, I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since any coin whatsoever (let us say a coin worth twenty centavos) is, strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures. Money is abstract, I repeated; money is the future tense. It can be an evening in

the suburbs, or music by Brahms; it can be maps, or chess, or coffee; it can be the words of Epictetus teaching us to despise gold; it is a Proteus more versatile than the one on the isle of Pharos. It is unforeseeable time, Bergsonian time, not the rigid time of Islam or the Porch. The determinists deny that there is such a thing in the world as a single possible act, *id est* an act that could or could not happen; a coin symbolizes man's free will. (I did not suspect that these "thoughts" were an artifice opposed to the Zahir and an initial form of its demoniacal influence.) I fell asleep after much brooding, but I dreamed that I was the coins guarded by a griffon.

The next day I decided that I had been drunk. I also made up my mind to get rid of the coin that had caused me so much worry. I looked at it: there was nothing out of the ordinary about it except for some scratches. The best thing to do would be to bury it in the garden or hide it in some corner of the library, but I wanted to remove myself from its orbit. I preferred to lose it. I did not go to the Pilar that morning, or to the cemetery; I took the underground to Constitución and from Constitución to the corner of San Juan and Boedo. I got off, on an impulse, at Urquiza and walked west and south. With scrupulous lack of plan I rounded a number of corners, and in a street which looked to me like all the others I went into a wretched little tavern, asked for a drink of brandy, and paid for it with the Zahir. I half closed my eyes behind my dark spectacles, managing not to see the house-numbers or the name of the street. That night I took a

veronal tablet and slept peacefully.

Up till the end of June I was busy writing a tale of fantasy. This contained two or three enigmatic circumlocutions, or "kennings": for example, instead of *blood* it says *sword-water*, and *gold* is the *serpent's bed*; the story is told in the first person. The narrator is an ascetic who has abjured the society of men and who lives in a kind of wilderness. (The name of this place is Gnitahidr.) Because of the simplicity and candor of his life there are those who consider him an angel; but this is a pious exaggeration, for there is no man who is free of sin. As a matter of fact, he has cut his own father's throat, the old man having been a notorious wizard who by magic arts had got possession of a limitless treasure. To guard this treasure from the insane covetousness of human beings is the purpose to which our ascetic has dedicated his life: day and night he keeps watch over the hoard. Soon, perhaps too soon, his vigil will come to an end: the stars have told him that the sword has already been forged which will cut it short forever. (Gram is the name of that sword.) In a rhetoric increasingly more complex he contemplates the brilliance and the flexibility of his body: in one paragraph he speaks distractedly of his scales; in another he says that the treasure which he guards is flashing gold and rings of red. In the end we understand that the ascetic is the serpent Fafnir, that the treasure upon which he lies is the treasure of the Nibelungs. The appearance of Sigurd brings the story to an abrupt end.

I have said that the composition of this trifle (into

which I inserted, in a pseudo-erudite fashion, a verse or two from the *Fáfnismál*) gave me a chance to forget the coin. There were nights when I felt so sure of being able to forget it that I deliberately recalled it to mind. What is certain is that I overdid these occasions: it was easier to start the thing than to have done with it. It was in vain that I told myself that that abominable nickel disc was no different from others that pass from one hand to another, alike, countless, innocuous. Attracted by this idea, I tried to think of other coins; but I could not. I remember, too, a frustrated experiment I made with Chilean five- and ten-centavo pieces and an Uruguayan *vintén*. On the sixteenth of July I acquired a pound sterling. I did not look at it during the day, but that night (and other nights) I put it under a magnifying glass and studied it by the light of a powerful electric lamp. Afterwards I traced it on paper with a pencil. But the brilliance and the dragon and Saint George were of no help to me: I could not manage to change obsessions.

In August I decided to consult a psychiatrist. I did not tell him the whole of my ridiculous story; I said I was bothered by insomnia, that I was being haunted by the image of something or other . . . let us say a poker-chip or a coin. A little later, in a bookshop in Sarmiento Street, I dug up a copy of Julius Barlach's *Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahirsage* (Breslau, 1899).

In this book my disease was clearly revealed. According to the preface, the author proposed "to gather together in one handy octavo volume all the



documents having to do with the Zahir superstition, including four papers from the Habicht collection and the original manuscript of the study by Philip Meadows Taylor." Belief in the Zahir is of Islamic origin, and seems to date from the eighteenth century. (Barlach rejects the passages which Zotenberg attributes to Abulfeda). *Zahir* in Arabic means "notorious," "visible"; in this sense it is one of the ninety-nine names of God, and the people (in Muslim territories) use it to signify "beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad." The first irrefutable testimony is that of the Persian Lutf Ali Azur. In the precise pages of the biographical encyclopedia entitled *Temple of Fire* this polygraph dervish writes that in a school at Shiraz there was a copper astrolabe "fashioned in such a way that whoever looked once upon it could thereafter think of nothing else; whence the King ordered that it should be sunk in the deepest part of the sea, lest men forget the universe." The study of Meadows Taylor is more detailed (he was in the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and wrote the famous novel, *Confessions of a Thug*). In about 1832, in the outskirts of Bhuj, Taylor heard the unusual expression "Verily he has looked on the Tiger," to signify madness or saintliness. He was informed that the reference was to a magic tiger which was the ruin of whoever beheld it, even from far away, since the beholder continued to think about it to the end of his days. Someone said that one of these unfortunates had fled to Mysore, where he had

painted the figure of the tiger on the walls of some palace. Years later, Taylor was inspecting the jails of the kingdom; and in the one at Nittur the governor showed him a cell where the floor, the walls and the ceiling had been covered, in barbaric colours which time was subtilizing before erasing them, by a Muslim fakir's elaboration of a kind of infinite Tiger. This Tiger was composed of many tigers in the most vertiginous fashion: it was traversed by tigers, scored by tigers, and it contained seas and Himalayas and armies which seemed to reveal still other tigers. The painter had died many years ago in this very cell; he had come from Sind, or maybe Guzerat, and his original purpose had been to design a map of the world. Indeed, some traces of this were yet to be discerned in the monstrous image. . . . Taylor told the story to Mohammed Al-Yemeni, of Fort William; Mohammed informed him that there was no created thing in this world which could not take on the properties of *Zaheer*,\* but that the All-merciful does not allow two things to be it at the same time, since one alone is able to fascinate multitudes. He said that there is always a Zahir; that in the Age of Innocence it was an idol named Yaúq; and later, a prophet of Jorasán who used to wear a veil embroidered with stones, or a golden mask.† He also said that God is inscrutable.

\*Such is Taylor's spelling of the word.

†Barlach observes that Yaúq; is mentioned in the Koran (71, 23) and that the Prophet is Al-Mokanna (the Veiled One), and that no one except Philip Meadows Taylor's surprising informant has identified them with the Zahir.

I read Barlach's monograph – read it and reread it. I hardly need describe my feelings. I remember my despair when I realized that nothing could save me; the sheer relief of knowing that I was not to blame for my predicament; the envy I felt for those whose Zahir was not a coin, but a piece of marble, or a tiger. How easy it would be not to think of a tiger! And I also remember the odd anxiety with which I studied this paragraph: "A commentator on the *Gulshan i Raz* says that he who has seen the Zahir will soon see the Rose; and he cites a verse interpolated in the *Asrar Nama* (Book of Things Unknown) of Attar: 'The Zahir is the shadow of the Rose, and the Rending of the Veil.' "

That night at Clementina's house I had been surprised not to see her younger sister, Mrs. Abascal. In October one of her friends told me about it: "Poor Julie! She got awfully *queer*, and they had to shut her up in the Bosch. She's just going to be the *death* of the nurses who have to *spoon-feed* her! Why, she keeps on talking about a *coin*, just like Morena Sackmann's *chauffeur*."

Time, which generally attenuates memories, only aggravates that of the Zahir. There was a time when I could visualize the obverse, and then the reverse. Now I see them simultaneously. This is not as though the Zahir were crystal, because it is not a matter of one face being superimposed upon another; rather, it is as though my eyesight were spherical, with the Zahir in the center. Whatever is not the Zahir comes to me fragmentarily, as if from a great distance: the arro-

gant image of Clementina; physical pain. Tennyson once said that if we could understand a single flower, we should know what we are and what the world is. Perhaps he meant that there is no fact, however insignificant that does not involve universal history and the infinite concatenation of cause and effect. Perhaps he meant that the visible world is implicit in every phenomenon, just as the will, according to Schopenhauer, is implicit in every subject. The Cabalists pretend that man is a microcosm, a symbolic mirror of the universe; according to Tennyson, everything would be. Everything, even the intolerable Zahir.

Before 1948 Julia's destiny will have caught up with me. They will have to feed me and dress me, I shall not know whether it is afternoon or morning, I shall not know who Borges was. To call this prospect terrible is a fallacy, for none of its circumstances will exist for me. One might as well say that an anesthetized man feels terrible pain when they open his cranium. I shall no longer perceive the universe: I shall perceive the Zahir. According to the teaching of the Idealists, the words "live" and "dream" are rigorously synonymous. From thousands of images I shall pass to one; from a highly complex dream to a dream of utter simplicity. Others will dream that I am mad; I shall dream of the Zahir. When all the men on earth think, day and night, of the Zahir, which will be a dream and which a reality – the earth or the Zahir?

In the empty night hours I can still walk through the streets. Dawn may surprise me on a bench in Garay Park, thinking (trying to think) of the passage

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in the *Asrar Nama* where it says that the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the Rending of the Veil. I associate that saying with this bit of information: In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis recite their own names, or the ninety-nine divine names, until they become meaningless. I long to travel that path. Perhaps I shall conclude by wearing away the Zahir simply through thinking of it again and again. Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God.