

Borges and Schopenhauer  
or the world as ethical will and aesthetical representation

José Eduardo Reis

The prominent motif of the essential antagonism within human nature in the literary work of Jorge Luis Borges is a passionate testimony of the Argentinian writer's deep awareness of the ethical implications of literature; obviously of literature not as means of ideological propaganda, but as a poetic *representation* whose self constitution and aesthetical originality does not necessarily ignore the *will* of the vast surrounding *world*. From the very beginning of this paper we make reference to the nouns that make up the title of the philosophic treaty *The World as Will and Representation* by the nineteenth-century German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer, in order to operate with some of his basic arguments as a hermeneutic key to our interpretation of the ethical dimension of Borges' poetics. With this, we also intend to juxtapose the literary and the philosophic discourses not as an incoherent patchwork of quotations and critical arguments, but as an attempt to examine the possibilities of combining two different syntaxes, one determined by rhetoric and the imaginary activity (literature), the other by abstract and rational reasoning (philosophy). In other words, we shall attempt to construct a sort of dialogue between Borges and Schopenhauer that may supply both a philosophical basis for the ethical dimension of some of the literary «fancies» of the former and illustrate fictionally the morals of the latter.

Borges when commenting upon the multifarious cultural sources of his collected works regarded them as an intellectual sign of what he called his «essential scepticism» (Borges, 1974: 775)<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, Schopenhauer when assessing his own philosophic system described it as an «immanent dogmatism» (Schopenhauer, 1974: I, 129). From the point of view of Borges' literary poetics, his essential scepticism was nevertheless permeated if not with the dogmatism at least with the aesthetical virtualities of the idealist dimension of Schopenhauer's philosophy, most especially, with his Kantian explanation of the world as being determined to a great extent by the activity of brain perception. In fact, the world as being an effect of the participation of the

mind in its continual empirical construction and transformation (the world as re-presentation) had led Schopenhauer to take for granted the dreamlike quality of our lives: «Life and dreams are leaves of one and the same book» – he stated (Schopenhauer, 1966: 18). In his turn, to clarify his own poetics, Borges wrote in the manner of an axiom: «After all, literature is nothing else but a ruled dream» (1022). These aphoristic formulations, despite their different epistemic origin and thematic scope show more than a doctrinal or ideological coincidence. They illustrate the deep respect Borges had for Schopenhauer's philosophy, the only one whose reading – and Borges' essays bear witness he perused many others – allowed him to recognize «some trait of the universe» (Borges, 1970: 243). But our intent here is not to examine the influence of the Schopenhauerian theory of knowledge on Borges' poetics. It is enough to recall that Borges' famous dreamlike worlds and labyrinthic spaces, his sophisticated games with time and eternity, his infinite causal regressions display, among other recurring motifs in his literary work, the possibility of being decodified by this post-Kantian theory of knowledge, a theory which basically emphasizes the role performed by the pre-experimental, the *a priori*, functions of the mind – of time, space and causality – in the representation of (in the dreaming of) the phenomenic world we are living in. Our purpose here is rather to relate some aspects of Schopenhauer's moral philosophy to the ethical implications of some of Borges' short stories. Hence, we have first to mention very briefly Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will, the other fundamental but primary conception of his system. Schopenhauer identified the will with Kant's notion of *thing-in-itself*, i.e. that which lies outside our mental representation of the world, the basis of all phenomena, «that which exists independently of perception through any of our senses and so that which really and truly is» (Schopenhauer, 1974: I, 90). Not determined by any form of mental activity, the will-in-itself is, according to this doctrine, the unknown, undivided and sole essence of the world. Nevertheless, this unintelligible and undividable will-in-itself, not governed by the principle that governs representations, the principle of sufficient reason, becomes somehow manifested in the world that is given to our mental perception. Let us say that for Schopenhauer the one metaphysical will when submitted to the time-space conditions inherent in mind activity becomes perceived in an infinitely phenomenic way; it becomes scattered in all phenomena that constitute the different layers – inorganic, vegetable, animal, intelligent – of the empirical world. In Schopenhauer's view, it is the immediate perception of our own body as a willing being that provides the key for the veiled understanding that the will acting in each one of us is one and the same will that, in different forms and different degrees of manifestation, acts in every phenomenon, in everything that is an object of mental representation. In short, the German

philosopher, in addition to stating that the world is representation, that the world becomes present by means of mental activity, declares as well that the essence of this world is the *Will*, which in itself, independently of that mental activity, remains unknown, although within the limits of that mental activity is known in its scattered manifestations under infinite, relative, and transient willing phenomenic forms. Hence this doctrine preserves the distinction between a *metaphysical will*, as the essence of the world, and a *phenomenic will*, as its continual manifestation and reproduction in the countless phenomena of this empirical world of ours. The relation between the two wills is somehow explained by the following quotation: «The fundamental character of all things is their fleeting nature and transitoriness. [...] Now how could nature throughout endless time endure the maintenance of forms and the renewal of individuals, the countless repetition of life-process, without becoming weary, unless her own innermost kernel were something timeless and thus wholly indestructible, a thing-in-itself quite different from its phenomena, something metaphysical that is distinct from everything physical? This is the will in ourselves and in everything» (Schopenhauer, 1974: II, 95). Related to this ontology, Schopenhauer's ethics make several important judgements regarding the *freedom of the will* and the *basis of morality*, which, by the way, are the titles of two separate books he wrote on this subject. Regarding the first point, Schopenhauer declares that every man wills first and only then knows what he wills. This means that man's rational faculty to operate with choices is but secondary to the primary will that acts in us as our essential nature. Man, like any other willing being, acts *necessarily* in consequence of a given volitive reason, and within a strict, although many times aleatory, chain of causal determinations. Man acts according to *motives*, as plants act according to stimuli, and the inorganic world to *causes*, and our deliberations only make clear what are the motives on which we act. On the other hand, it is this need to choose between different motives that reveals what we are, our volitive *empirical character*. Schopenhauer also states that every empirical character shows its unchangeable nature, since that character is ultimately the sum of all his necessary choices. Hence this paradox: «man does at all times what he wills, and yet he does this necessarily» (Schopenhauer, 1985: 98).

There is in this doctrine a clear fatalist view of man's existential and moral conduct that, somehow, we can see aesthetically represented in Borges' literary work. For instance, in the short story «Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz». What is depicted here is a sort of epiphany, the sudden self-awareness of the hero's fatal destiny. «Every destiny – states the narrator –, however long and hard, consists actually of one single moment: the moment a man knows for ever who he himself is» (Borges, 1974: 562). That is precisely what comes to happen with Cruz, an unyielding ex-deserter, who after having been

compelled by circumstances – by motives Schopenhauer would say – to rejoin the regular army, found himself one day commanding the persecution of another unyielding deserter he had never met before, Martín Fierro. At the very moment Cruz' soldiers were on the verge of catching and killing Fierro, Cruz was struck by the self-revelation of his destiny, the sudden self-knowing of his unchangeable inner will or character, in Schopenhauer's words. Cruz «realised» – states the narrator – «that no destiny is better than any other, but that every man ought to fulfil the one he carries within himself [...]. He realised his innermost destiny was wolf-like, not like a dog; he realised that the other was himself. Dawn broke in the open plain; Cruz flung his army cap on the ground, cried out he wouldn't allow the crime of killing a brave man and threw himself against the soldiers, on the side of the deserter Martín Fierro» (563).

In «Deutsches Requiem» the main character and narrator, the Nazi Otto zur Linde, acknowledges, at a certain point of his written confession, the intellectual consolation he had found when, being in hospital far from the military glories of the first Nazi victories, he read the philosophic reasons displayed by Schopenhauer's deterministic doctrine of the will. «In the first volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena* I read again that everything which can happen to a man, from the instant of his birth until his death, has been preordained by him. Thus, every negligence is deliberate, every chance encounter an appointment, every humiliation a penitence, every failure a mysterious victory, every death a suicide. There is no more skilful consolation than the idea that we have chosen our own misfortunes; this individual teleology reveals a secret order and prodigiously confounds us with the divinity» (Borges, 1970: 175).

It is this judgement, regarding the voluntary quality of our acts, not proceeding from a thoughtful deliberation of our knowledge – of our reason – but from the primary essence of our being, from the objectified will in every one of us in the form of a unique and unchangeable character which necessarily reveals itself by a motivational – causal – determination; it is this doctrine with strong moral implications that Borges seems to resort to when finishing his essay on the refutation of time. There he writes: «Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborgh and the hell of the Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. [...] The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges» (269).

In spite of this strict deterministic and fatalist doctrine of the will, ruled by the principle of causality, Schopenhauer added interesting considerations in the 17th chapter of the first volume of his major work, regarding the occasionality of the causal order, i.e. its simultaneous arbitrary dimension. He argues that causal investigation is unable to extend our knowledge into the essence of things. This investigation may explain why given certain circumstances, certain effects necessarily have to follow, it may extend examination to the

links between objects and between parts of objects, but it is unable to explain why the nature of that connection is necessarily so and not otherwise. And this is because reason cannot penetrate the unintelligible essence of things, i.e. the will-in-itself. Borges' short story «The Lottery in Babylon» recreates, in our view, this judgement of Schopenhauer on the casuality of the causal order. Babylon stands here as an allegory for the arbitrariness of the course of human life, in spite of its «iron-clad» deterministic development. Babylon is depicted as being ruled by an omnipotent gambling institution, «The Company», whose metaphysical and ecclesiastical sovereignty conditioned everyone to its aleatory and unfathomable rules. The lottery as an institution was but a simulacrum of the cosmic chance, «an intensification of chance, a periodical infusion of the chaos in the cosmos» (59). Every stage of the draw was itself ruled by a regressive unexpected casual bifurcation, enlarging to infinity the unpredictability of the course of events. Every personal or collective act, every practice, every habit was ruled by occasional causes emanating from a secret Company (a mysterious order made up of determinism and arbitrariness): «There are also impersonal draws with an indefinite purpose. One decrees that a sapphire of Taprobana be thrown into the waters; another that a bird be released from the roof of a tower; another, that each century a grain of sand be withdrawn from (or added to) the innumerable ones on the beach. The consequences are, at times, terrible» (60).

We mentioned above the specific second treaty of Schopenhauer on ethics – *The Basis of Morality* – which, together with the content of the fourth book of *The World as Will and Representation*, will continue to be the touchstone of our reading of Borges. Schopenhauer asserts that the foundation of morals derives from the empirical world, from the example of individual conduct to which one attributes genuine moral worth, not from any superior theoretical principle. And what is this empirical basis of ethics, what is this unique and genuine moral motivation that is the foundation of virtues, such as justice and philanthropy? Compassion, answers the philosopher, after adding that the other two fundamental motivations for human actions are egoism and malice. In his view, man is basically egoistic, and the explanation for egoism is metaphysical, since it is rooted in our essential volitive nature. The metaphysical will, when individuated in countless phenomena, generates egoism, which brings with it dissension and suffering. «Every knowing individual – says Schopenhauer – [...] discovers himself as the whole will-to-live, or as the will-in-itself [...] as a microcosm to be valued equally with the macrocosm» (Schopenhauer, 1966: 332). As a volitive being, man acts fundamentally motivated by the same need to assert his will-to-live that pervades the whole of living nature. Human knowledge is but the tool of a species at the service of that endless end of willing. Human conflicts are, therefore, almost inevitable

in a phenomonic world of contradictory wills, and whose interdependence between its different organic layers shows the minimum of harmony required for the existence of life. Strife pervades the whole of nature. «This universal conflict is to be seen most clearly in the animal kingdom. Animals have the vegetable kingdom for their nourishment, and within the animal kingdom again every animal is the prey and food of some other. [...] Thus the will-to-live generally feasts on itself» (Schopenhauer, 1966: 147). This intrinsic conflict of the will-to-live in all its phenomena is then reproduced by man; the social institutions being, in Schopenhauer's view, the means developed by reason to prevent or at least to contain and discipline a constant burst of violence propelled by the chief and fundamental ego-motivation of man. Violence, war, injustice, malice and all kinds of conflicts between men, either individually or collectively regarded, have as their basic explanation a self-malevolent affirmation of the will-to-live.

The Borgesean narrative illustration of this universal drama is to be found in many of his short stories, starting with those included in his first fictional book *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935). It is a book filled with fantastic biographies of violent and malicious characters devoted to the practice of wrong or, in Schopenhauerian terminology, devoted to the affirmation of their unbounded will-to-live at the expenses of others' will-to-live. Some of these characters are actually inspired by real historical personalities. But apart from their names and occasional time-space identification, the real protagonists of these stories are perfidy, cruelty, tyranny and cunning: all the ignoble forms of human infamy. The «deeds» of the malignant characters depicted in this book appear as an allegoric pageant of evil-doing. To start with those of «The Dread Redeemer Lazarus Morell», a leader in the slave owning America of a powerful group of criminals who urged the slaves to flee from their masters only to recapture them and to collect the rewards. The method used by Morell, was «unique [...] for its deadly manipulation of hope and for its step-by-step development, so like the hideous unfolding of a nightmare» (Borges, 1975: 24). Then follows the story of «Tom Castro, The Implausible Impostor», a case of astute manipulation of the feelings of a comfortless mother, unable to accept the death of her son. After the story «The Widow Ching, Lady Pirate», a virile woman who, on the death of her husband, led a fleet of 40 thousand pirates that almost overthrew the Chinese empire, comes the «Monk Eastman Purveyor of Iniquities», a «monumental» bully who in the American wild west sold his revenge services as following: «Ear chawed off \$15; Leg or arm broke 19; Shot in leg 25; Stab 25; Doing the big job 100 and up» (56). «The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan» is the story of the «prowesses» of another American ruffian who after being shot «owed to justice of grown men twenty-one deaths – not counting the Mexicans» (61).

The tales «The Insulting Master of Etiquette Kotsuké no Suké» (a wicked Japanese imperial officer using his social prerogatives to humiliate a noble feudal vassal), «The Masked Dyer, Hákim de Merv» (an unscrupulous religious manipulator disguised as an Islamic prophet) and «Streetcorner Man» (the report of a crime that turns out to have been committed by the narrator himself) are the remaining three short stories of this volume. All of them can be read, not without tragic humour, as parables of different archetypal forms of human iniquity in all times, in all places.

Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will and his moral philosophy claim to give an explanation for this «universal infamy». Borges was not indifferent to it, as we may witness in three other main themes of his literary work. The first concerns the fictional representation of physical and intellectual fighting as if it were an inevitable phenomonic effect of the inner divorce of the one essential will. The later *Doctor Brodie's Report* (1970) presents us a set of illuminating examples. The short story «The Meeting» is the fatal encounter of two card-players, Uriarte and Duncan, driven in momentary anger, to fight each other. Their borrowed daggers, unknown to them, had belonged in the past to two famous gaúchos, Almada and Almanza, ruffians who never had the chance in their life time, despite their eager mutual wish, to «meet» each other. Both fighting as if they were real dagger experts, Uriarte ends by killing his adversary. But, states the narrator: «I began to wonder whether it was Maneco Uriarte who killed Duncan or whether in some uncanny way it could have been the weapons, not the men, which fought. [...] as though the knives were coming awake after a long sleep side by side in the cabinet. Even after the gauchos were dust, the knives – not the men, their tools – knew how to fight. And that night they fought well» (Borges, 1976: 65). It is worth noticing that the hatred between Almada and Almanza – a verbal pun emphasizing the essential identity of the opposites – had as an instrument of its manifestation the daggers of which they were the owners – daggers that act as symbols of universal dissent. The hatred between the two gauchos transmigrated, so to say, to the latent rivalry between two ignorant dagger-fighters (Uriarte and Duncan), who, in the right circumstances, let it burst out. It is also worth noticing the ethical meaning of this story, since it extols the message that rivalry – the inner conflict of the will-to-live, in Schopenhauer's terminology – here raised to the level of deep hatred and physical conflict, is, somehow, eternal and easily reactivated by anyone – therefore outliving the death of violent characters, as soon as occasional causes allow it to emerge. Hence, the conclusion of the narrator in whose indirect self-question one may read a suggestion of tragic truth: «Things last longer than people; who knows whether these knives meet again, who knows whether the story ends here» (65). Three other short stories from this same book treat the subject of human

antagonism on different levels, from the crudest physical violence to the most sophisticated artistic and academic emulation. «The Other Duel» reports the story of the sadistic exploitation of the rivalry between two gauchos who have a last chance to defeat each other in a final contest: to see who could run further after their heads had been chopped off. «The Duel» tells how two artists developed their work on the basis of a silent dispute between their styles. «Guayaquil» depicts the competition between two historians, both disciples of Schopenhauer, on a mission for the exhumation of important documents related to the struggle for the leadership of the war of liberation in South America. Again, what Borges represents fictionally in these short stories is the confrontation of individual wills as the anecdotic emanation of some universal and repetitive discord. In this sense, it is symbolic that the protagonists of the last reported confrontation are historians, those who have as one of their main tasks to account for the process of human antagonism in its more structural forms. Nevertheless – and now we move to the second Borgesean theme related to the ethical implications of Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will – all this universal conflict and clash of egos is but a cosmic illusion, since it is one and the same essential will that is always and everywhere acting, however countless and transient be the individual space-time forms it may take in the phenomonic world. This means that, apart from the visual phenomonic order governing the world, including the order of human law, there is another order, associated with the will-in-itself, that transcends the principle of sufficient reason and the principle of individuation. Schopenhauer calls it the *eternal justice*. Basically it is a justice that concerns the identity of the will regardless of its temporal and spatial individual manifestations. It is a necessary justice, the result of the will's objectification, that is inflicted by the will to live on itself, not on a particular being. «The punishment must be so joined with the offence that the two are one» (Schopenhauer, 1966: 351). Suffering must in consequence also be one. Therefore, in the philosopher's view, eternal justice implies the intuitive understanding that the inflicter of suffering and the one who endures that suffering are just two phenomenal manifestations of one and the same essential will. «Deceived by the knowledge bound to its service the will fails to recognize itself; seeking enhanced well-being in one of its phenomena it produces great suffering in another. Thus in the fierceness and intensity of its desire it buries its teeth in its own flesh, not knowing that it always injures only itself» (354). The idea of the essential identity of opposites associated with the Schopenhauerian notion of eternal justice is to be found in several «magic» stories of Borges. The persecutor that is the persecuted, the hero that is the traitor, the tormenter that is the tormented, the self and the other in apparently contradictory positions which become reversible and lead ultimately to the revelation that they are both the same one. One of the best examples is the

story «The Theologians». Its main theme deals with an intellectual emulation, now between two zealous medieval churchmen, Aureliano and Juan de Pannonia. They dispute about the theological refutation of a sect – the Monotones – that professed the doctrine of the cyclical repetition of time. Pannonia will be the winner of this ecclesiastic contest, but the arguments he uses in the inquisition to impugn the Monotones and to send their leader, Euforbo, to the stake will be used against himself on a latter occasion. He had discredited Euforbo's belief in the cyclical repetition of time, but he would himself become a victim of such a doctrine since he would also be executed at the stake, similarly impugned by the inquisition as a heretic. His executioner would be his former adversary, Aureliano, who, when condemning another sect – the Histriones – perniciously recalled that one of their doctrinal points was consistent with the arguments that Juan de Pannonia had made use of when impugning the Monotones. Aureliano, in his turn, will go mad out of guilt feelings and will be killed by fire. One day, at midday, in a forest «a lightning bolt set fire to the trees and Aurelian died just as John [Juan] had» (Borges, 1970: 157). The unsound, imperishable but infallible eternal justice has asserted its own rights and the one time tormenter become the tormented, as the two faces of one same suffering being. «The end of this story – tells the narrator – can only be related in metaphors since it takes place in the kingdom of heaven, where there is no time. Perhaps it would be correct to say that Aurelian spoke with God and that He was so little interested in religious differences that He took him for John of Pannonia. [...] In Paradise, Aurelian learned that, for the unfathomable divinity, he and Juan of Pannonia (the orthodox and the heretic, the abhorrer and the abhorred, the accuser and the accused) formed one single person» (157-58).

The last topic of Borges' poetics that is consistent with Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will is related to the kernel of the philosopher's ethics, which is, as we saw above, human compassion. And what is that? In Schopenhauer's view, it is the piercing through of the «veil of Maya» – the veil of individuated but deceptive knowledge that asserts one's will-to-live at the expense of another's will-to-live. It is the pragmatic effect of the insight into the real unity of things, proceeding from the same kind of intuitive knowledge that is at the root of the aesthetical grasping of the essential nature of the world, but now diverted to the undifferentiated loving of every being. It is man's spontaneous self-recognition «that the in-itself of his own phenomenon is also that of others» (Schopenhauer, 1964: 372). It manifests itself in all virtuous actions devoid of self-interest and preceptual ideological determinations. Its constant and chief human manifestation, to the extent of one's taking upon oneself the pain of the whole world – of self-denying one's own will on behalf of other's will – is what defines the state of sanctity. Eventually it leads to asceticism, a

state of «voluntary renunciation, resignation, true-calm and complete willlessness» (379). Compassion is not, however, an uncommon intuitive knowledge, even if it does not manifest itself in the permanent form of sanctity and asceticism. That is why the Nazi and leader of a concentration camp, Otto zur Linde, in Borges' «Deutsches Requiem», fought with himself against the awakening of any trait of human love. As a consequence, he was pitiless towards one of his victims, David Jerusalem, a Jewish poet of great insight whose literary work was much appreciated by Zur Linde, who writes in his own confession: «I do not know whether Jerusalem understood that, if I destroyed him it was to destroy my compassion» (Borges, 1970: 177).

It is also this sympathetic insight, or the human process leading to it, even among the crudest people, that is the subject of «Rosendo's Tale». Rosendo is a professional bully who, after having suffered the loss of a close friend, little by little realises the stupidity of violence, until he has a sort of revelation the moment he sees himself reflected in the character of another bully with whom he refuses to fight at the expense of his own macho honour and public prestige (Borges, 1976: 44-51). Revelation, the mystical revelation of God – «the union with the divinity, with the universe (I do not know whether these words differ in meaning)» (Borges, 1970: 206) – is precisely what happens to the magus Tzinacán in the story «The God's Script», but only after he has intuitively grasped the essence of things and after experiencing a feeling of cosmic sympathy. In Schopenhauer's thought, this sympathy, raised to its highest degree can only lead men (but a very few indeed) to asceticism, that is to say to the denial of the will-to-live. Not to suicide, but to the transcendence of the ceaseless and unquenchable satisfaction of the needs of the will-to-live. In Schopenhauer's view, this is the only condition, apart from the temporary one afforded by *aesthetical contemplation, where man becomes free. Free from needs, free from desire, free from passions, free from illusions. And that paradoxical condition, of willing not willing, that can be witnessed by the examples of the mystics and saints at all times and everywhere is also the ultimate degree of the objectification of the will-in-itself. That is to say, the will-to-live, with the attainment of self-knowledge by means of human consciousness, in very rare but real human examples attains as well, in Schopenhauerian words, its ultimate goal, denies itself or liberates itself from itself. Such is the condition that man only, as the highest objectification of the will, is able to perform. It is translated in religious language by different expressions: «ecstasy», «transport», «passion», «mystical ravishment», «union with God», «enlightenment», «nirvana». But no words are able to describe, even less to explain it.*

Borges' story «The Congress», from his last published work of fiction, *The Book of Sand*, is, in our reading, a sort of parable depicting the Schopenhauerian

ontology consistent with the affirmation and denial of the will. It is the story of the genesis and extinction (the affirmation and denial) of a megalomaniac project carried out by a rich landowner, don Alejandro. He wanted to found a brotherhood named the Congress, a microcosmic society as simulacrum of the whole planet, pursuing vague political and humanistic ends. Some inconsequential actions were carried out by the few members of this brotherhood, such as the planning of an assembly that would represent humankind according to the platonic archetypal theory of ideas, the creation of a library containing all documents ever written in the whole world, the construction of an amphitheatre in the middle of the desert plain of South America for the meetings of all the members of the congress, the establishment of a supranational language as a means of communication among themselves. The whole project, however, would come to an end in consequence of the will of its creator, don Alejandro. Following a self-revelation, he renounced his wealth, dismissed the Congress and set fire to the countless books that had meanwhile been collected for the library. Liberated from his megalomaniac ideal – from his project that first had to be affirmed to be afterwards denied –, don Alejandro came to the understanding that the creation of the congress was reproducing the heavy burden of existence. «The Congress of the world – he said – began with the first moment of the world and it will go on when we are dust. There's no place on earth where it does not exist. The Congress is the books we've burned. The Congress is Job on the ash heap and Christ on the Cross» (Borges, 1979: 32). Alejandro's faith and strong will of not to will affected all members of the Congress, including Ferri, the narrator, a journalist on the newspaper *Last Hour*, who had been introduced to the learning of the English language by reading Stevenson's «Requiem» (two obvious puns for this allegoric voluntary dissolution of the chaotic and willing congress that stands for the chaotic and willing cosmos). In fact, the night the Congress was extinguished, its few members made a chariot tour through the city and somehow they also experienced a mystical ravishment, or, in Schopenhauerian language, they were temporarily liberated from the untenable burden of the willing nature of the world. «Words are symbols – we are told by the narrator – that assume a shared memory. [...] The mystics invoke a rose, a kiss, a bird that is all birds, a sun that is all the stars and the sun, a jug of wine, a garden, or the sexual act. Of these metaphors, none will serve me for that long, joyous night, which left us, tired out and happy, at the borders of dawn» (33).

This allegoric short story is therefore a parable for a change in the inner nature of man. The «essential scepticism» of Borges never excluded a firm ethical resolution towards his own literary work. And in his allegoric fictions as well as in much of his poetry there is often an echo of Schopenhauer's philosophical judgements. Rather than influences, one may speak about

theoretical coincidences, that allow us, as readers, to glimpse a fascinating dialogue between a literary and a philosophical representation of the world with deep ethical implications. In Borges these ethical preoccupations lasted until the end of his life. The last poem published in his lifetime may stand for a symbolic epilogue bearing witness to what we have just said. He regards the medieval constitution of the Swiss confederation as a reasoning conspiracy of man whose ideal could be followed by other conspirators all over the world. I translate: «In the center of Europe a conspiracy is taking place. / The fact goes back to 1291. / [...] They are men of different stocks, that profess / different religions and that speak different languages. / They took the strange resolution to be reasonable. / They decided to forget their differences and to stress their affinities. [...] / In the center of Europe, in the highlands of Europe, there is growing a tower of reason and resolute faith. / The cantons are now twenty two. / [...] Tomorrow they will be the whole planet. / Perhaps what I'm saying is not true; I would it were prophetic» (Borges, 1985: 95).

- 1 Whenever we are unable to use an english translation, we shall quote from and translate into english the castilian edition of Borges' *Obras Completas 1923-1977*.

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James Irby, London, Penguin, 1970.

—, *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, London, Penguin, 1975.

—, *Doctor's Brodie's Report*, trans. Thomas di Giovanni, London, Penguin, 1976.

—, *The Book of Sand*, trans Norman Thomas di Giovanni, London, Penguin, 1979.

—, *Obras Completas 1923-1972*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1984.

—, *Los Conjurados*, Madrid, Alianza, 1985.

Schopenhauer, Arthur, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Boss Merrill, 1960.

—, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, New York, Dover, 1966.

—, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Oxford, Clarendon, 2 vols., 1974.

—, *On the Freedom of the Will*, trans. Konstantin Kolenda, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985.