Schopenhauer’s Fictions

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Much has been written on the enormous influence of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy on the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges was a voracious reader of Schopenhauer1 but, according to an interview with Jean de Milleret, he was not so much subscribing to Schopenhauer’s Idealist philosophy as looking for ways to use his ideas in his own literary work:

j’ai surtout songé aux possibilités littéraires de la philosophie idéaliste, disons, plutôt qu’à son bien-fondé. Cela ne signifie pas forcément que je croie à la philosophie de Berkeley ou de Schopenhauer du fait que j’ai utilisé leurs possibilités littéraires, ni que je les pratique, ni que je leur aie donné ma foi, ma conviction. (72)

This attitude with which Borges approaches Schopenhauer’s work already implies a critique—that, rather than offering truths about the real world,

1 “El culto de Alemania se lo debo a Carlyle, pero yo decidí enseñarme ese idioma para leer en el original El mundo como voluntad y representación, de Schopenhauer, y también a Heine y Goethe” (Alifano 97).
Idealism presents a framework on which to construct fictional worlds. But if we consider *The World as Will and Idea* as a philosophical fiction, then it is a fiction that is more logically perverse than any of Borges’s stories.

Many of Borges’s fictions conspicuously make use of Schopenhauer’s particular Idealist system, even going as far as referencing his ideas directly and having his characters reading Schopenhauer’s works. But on a structural level, his hypothetical worlds also show the influence of the logical structures of Schopenhauer’s philosophical writings, which often use self-referentiality in order to create a discourse that doubles back on itself. One well-known example of this strategy, in Schopenhauer’s early work, can be found in *The Fourfold Root of Reason*, where he presents a proof of the principle of sufficient reason formulated as a piece of self-referential logic. This proof has been termed “Schopenhauer’s circle”:

> The principle of sufficient reason is just the expression of this necessity of a reason or ground for every judgement. Now whoever requires a proof for this reason, already assumes thereby that it is true; in fact he bases his demand on this very assumption. He therefore finds himself in that circle of demanding a proof for the right to demand a proof. (Jacquette 57)

This circular sleight-of-hand, ingenious yet profoundly dissatisfying, calls to mind the same “double-decker, perverse, but logically perfect structure” that Stanislaw Lem deems to be the distinctive quality of Borges’s fictions (234).

This meta-argumentative technique can be found in its fully developed form in Schopenhauer’s most exhaustive text, *The World as Will and Idea*, where it is used to structure the dialectical construction of his Idealist reality. Schopenhauer establishes the foundation of his world upon a radical declaration of subjectivism in the tradition of Descartes and Kant: “The world is my idea”—that is to mean, the world is merely a phenomenon of the subjective mind. In the beginning, Schopenhauer’s Idealism is even more strict than Kant’s, denying Kant’s things-in-themselves, the individual objects behind the phenomena. Every object presupposes a perceiving

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2 On the other hand, Juan Arana does not consider the reading of philosophy as fantastic literature to be a critique of philosophy, but rather a suggestion that both philosophy and literature, as products of human thought, are equally worthwhile (173). But the consistently ironic attitude that Borges adopts towards philosophy, and towards Idealism specifically, seems to point to a critique (see Griffin, 6 onwards).
subject, and therefore the object can only be “idea,” a phenomenal construction of the subject (27). For Schopenhauer, that which can be perceived is idea, and that which cannot be perceived is unknowable. What cannot be known cannot exist; as an example, he tries paradoxically to imagine the phenomenal world independent of a perceiving subject, realizing that the very thought becomes “nothing but the process in the intellect of the knowing subject who is perceiving an objective world, and so it is the very thing we had wanted to exclude” (14). As with “Schopenhauer’s circle,” this proof that the unknowable is non-existent involves a self-referential step that roots the argument upon there being a mind who demands the proof; for Schopenhauer, logic never exists in a void, but is always and inextricably bound to a subjective logician.

Yet the subject’s own existence also seems to be under attack by this very principle. Although Schopenhauer’s tenet that “there can never be an absolute and independent existence” (14) is applied to refute the Kantian object, it must apply to the subject as well. Schopenhauer rejects what he calls “theoretical egoism,” essentially solipsism, in which the subject “holds all phenomena, excepting its own individual self, to be phantoms” (37). Although this view cannot be disproved, it is also not a useful philosophical argument, since nothing else could be known except for the fact that the knowing subject is thinking. But by rejecting theoretical egoism, Schopenhauer is assuming the existence of something outside of the subject-object dichotomy: this thing-in-itself he calls the Will.

The Will is first abstracted from the actions of the body: apart from constructing ideas from phenomenal data, the knowing subject also acts, and this inner force that propels action is one aspect of the Will, and the subject’s acting body is “the objectivity of [that] will” (35). Schopenhauer then extends this description of the body, as simultaneously idea and Will, to every other object in the material world, including inanimate objects; thus all natural forces, like magnetism, electricity, and gravity, are manifestations of Will (42). Logically, this assumption that all movement is governed by Will can now be applied back onto the actions of the subject; his actions cannot be free, since “the individual, the person, is not Will as a thing-in-itself, but is a phenomenon of Will, and as such is already

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3 Citations from *The World as Will and Idea* are from the English translation of J. Ber-
determined and has entered into the form of the phenomenal” (45). By combining the two propositions, the world as idea and the world as Will, Schopenhauer has closed the narrative loop of the text; the first subject—the narrator at the beginning who states, “The world is my idea”—is himself merely an idea.

Borges uses a similar logical structure to drive many of his stories. The dreamer in “Las ruinas circulares” most transparently mirrors the narrator in *The World as Will and Idea*. He arrives in the ruins with a goal: “Quería soñar un hombre: quería soñarlo con integridad minuciosa e imponerlo a la realidad” (*Ficciones* 72). His dreams are “dialectical,” reflecting Schopenhauer’s use of dialectical reasoning to construct his own world. The dreamed man is identical to a real man in every way, except in being impervious to fire. When, at the end of the story, the ruins are engulfed in flames, the dreamer is not burnt, and he realizes that “él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo” (81), just as Schopenhauer’s narrator realizes that the perceiving subject is but a phenomenon.

Both *The World as Will and Idea* and “Las ruinas circulares” are texts that are logically structured to double back on themselves. In reference to Borges’s work, Lem calls this technique *unitas oppositorum*, “the unity of mutually exclusive opposites” (239), as in the unity of the dreamer and the dreamed man. But this technique could also be called dialectical synthesis, as when Schopenhauer unites the subject and the object, Will and idea. The consequence in both cases of this narrative logic that closes in on itself is that it creates a discursive world that is removed from the reader’s reality. John Sturrock compares Borges’s fictions to Schopenhauer’s philosophy by seeing them both as closed worlds:

> Idealism, which holds that mental phenomena are all we can ever know of reality since whatever lies beyond them is by definition unknowable, offers him... everything... The Idealism of Berkeley and Schopenhauer is seamless; it is a pure mentalism. Whatever may or may not lie outside the limits of consciousness, the troublesome Thing-in-Itself is left to itself. In Schopenhauer the Real is reintroduced not in the service of some hypothetical matter but as the inconceivable noumenon or Will, of which all that we can perceive is the objectification. (22-23)

Borges’s worlds, like Idealism, are independent of any supposition of an empirical reality. Sturrock further likens the reader to the knowing sub-
ject and the author to the unknowable Will, whose manifestation, the
text, is all that is available to the reader (23). Ana Sierra similarly notes
the distance that Borges creates between his Idealist worlds and the real
world, describing his fictions as “una realidad discursiva que declara su
autonomía de la realidad fenoménica” (36). Like Schopenhauer’s ideas,
Borges’s fictions cannot convey the essence of the real, and Sierra suggests
that he uses the recurring motifs of mirrors and the double to emphasize
that his conceptual narratives are, as abstractions of reality, merely images
(40).

If both Borges’s fictional worlds and *The World as Will and Idea* are
discursive realities that close in upon themselves and exist independently
from the reader’s reality, how can we distinguish between fiction on the
one hand and Idealist philosophy on the other? One common approach
is to try and give a general definition of each term; however, this is natu-
really a fraught enterprise, and, in the case of Borges, the definitions often
align with whether or not a particular scholar wishes to portray him as a
philosopher (see Johnson, 11 onwards). On the other hand, some schol-
ars reject the distinction between the two. Lem, for example, sees no dif-
ference between them except a nominal one; he writes, “If Schopenhauer
had never existed, and if Borges presented to us the ontological doctrine
of ‘The World as Will,’ we would never accept it as a philosophical system
that must be taken seriously; we would take it as an example of a ‘fantas-
tic philosophy.’ As soon as nobody assents to it, a philosophy becomes
automatically fantastic literature” (237 note). This hypothesis also has its
correlative: if people began to accept fantastic literature as a philosophi-
ical description of the world, would it automatically become real? Borges
asks this question in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” where a fictional world,
Tlön, in which Idealism governs “su lenguaje y las derivaciones de su
lenguaje –la religión, las letras, la metafísica” (*Ficciones* 16), slowly begins
to encroach upon the real world. The narrator anticipates the complete
overtaking of the real world by the fictional as people become more and
more amenable to the rigorous Idealism of Tlön. But the narrator never
lets the reader forget that Tlön is a product of human creativity, and that
the rigour of Idealism is “un rigor de ajedrecistas, no de ángeles” (37). As
Alejandro Riberi points out, an Ideal world such as Tlön is not meant as
a description of reality; it makes no truth-claims. Rather, its systematic,
logically-consistent construction is a result of the suppression of the complexities of reality (218). Lem is partially correct in asserting that the reader ultimately decides whether a text is philosophic or fantastic, but, at least in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” there are clear indications that Borges is emphasizing the space between his rigorously logical worlds and the real world.

Yet, the very act of narration bridges this space. Even if they are closed worlds, both Borges’s fictions and Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea* are still texts; they are inevitably connected to the “real” world, that is, the reader’s world, simply by their being read. Every hypothetical world intersects the phenomenal world by way of the reader; this is how Schopenhauer can write about his noumenal Will, however unknowable it is. How do the two writers compare in their strategies for bridging the world of the reader and the logically impenetrable world of their text?

Despite the claim by James E. Irby that Borges’s essays are indistinguishable from his fictions (Agassi 288), there seems to be a definitive difference in the way the narrator is considered. In “Las ruinas circulares,” the question of how a self-contained world that is autonomous from the reader’s reality can be narrated is never answered—how can one narrate from within a dream? The narrator is an invisible but omnipresent bridge between the discursive world of the text and the world of the reader. But in the essay “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” the narrator’s reality is one that can clearly be shared with the reader; the text does not loop back on itself to become a self-contained, Ideal world, even if the text itself describes such an idealism. Borges ends the work thus:

> And yet, and yet... Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos... El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (*Otras inquisiciones* 114)

Silva G. Dapía, in reading this passage, focuses on the identity of time with the self, and understands Borges to be “denying the boundaries between the self and the universe,” which, as she notes, is equivalent to denying the self (147). But this would be ignoring the broader import of the essay, its essential irony, and the impact of its last sentence—the essay
ends, powerfully, with a melancholic affirmation of self. Idealism, here, seems to be a means of escape from the world to a realm of possible worlds; however, the storyteller himself must bear the burden of remaining Earth-bound in order to narrate those worlds to others.

*The World as Will and Idea* is, like one of Borges’s hypothetical worlds, a closed system. The single thing-in-itself that unites all phenomena, presumably also uniting the reader as perceiving subject with the text as object, is the Will, which can never be known directly. By Schopenhauer’s own strict logic, the imperceptible Will could not exist; yet paradoxically, not only can it be talked about, but it is the only thing that exists, of which everything else is only an objectification. In addressing this contradiction, Schopenhauer articulates the relationship between the discursive reality of his text and the reality of the reader:

I should be equally misunderstood by anyone who might think that it is all the same in the end whether we designate this inner nature of all phenomena as *will* or call it by any other name. This would be the case if that thing-in-itself were something whose existence we merely *inferred*, and thus known only indirectly and only in the *abstract*. Then, indeed, we might call it what we pleased; the name would stand merely as the symbol of an unknown quantity. But the word *will*, which, like a magic spell [*Zauberwort*], is to reveal to us the essence of everything in nature... something that is in every way immediately recognized and so familiar to us that we know and understand what will is far better than anything else. (43)

Iván Almeida notes that the Will cannot be known by perception or reasoning, but rather by intuition alone (117); while perception and reasoning are ruled out, it is not precisely *intuition* that is being described here, but rather *revelation*. In fact, in this passage, Schopenhauer clearly defines the relationship between the reader’s own experience and the closed world of the text: it is pure magic. If we use the fictions and essays of Borges as a spectrum to reflect on Schopenhauer, we must situate *The World as Will and Idea* definitively on the side of fiction.

We might compare Schopenhauer’s magic spell to the divine sentence sought by Tzinacán in Borges’s story “La escritura del Dios,” in order to better understand the implications of such magic. In human language, signs are dual, composed of signifier and signified. The signifier is conventionally understood as a substitute for the signified, and often a poor substitute, one that can’t possibly express the fullness of the signified object.
But the utterance that Tzinacán seeks is absolute—an utterance that does not merely represent reality, but that must be identical to reality. Logically, just as in Schopenhauer’s *Welt als Wille*, the whole world would merely be a phenomenon, merely “sombras o simulacros” of that divine utterance (*El Aleph* 161). When Tzinacán finally comes to comprehend it, he realizes that he has had to transcend his own self, since even the self was only a phenomenon of the real. With that final surrender, the world is reduced to the word, to a monistic whole. Schopenhauer similarly posits reality to be non-dual, declaring that subject and object, self and other to be one; in *The World as Will and Idea*, there is a single subject who is simultaneously the narrator and the narrated object.

Tzinacán’s method of perceiving the Real is similar to Schopenhauer’s faculty of aesthetic experience—both require the complete renunciation of one’s individuality. According to Schopenhauer, a reader, rather than subjectively perceiving, must objectively perceive—that is, to perceive “not as individual, but as pure will-less subject of knowledge” (119). We might apply this method of reading in order to break in to the closed discursive reality of *The World as Will and Idea*. As Lem notes, such a rigorously logical system is as impossible to penetrate, rationally, as the theoretical egoism that Schopenhauer rejects: “To refute them, it would not be sufficient merely to show their absurd consequences. To refute them, it would be necessary to call into question the total syntax of human thought, and thinking in its ontological dimensions” (238). This is precisely what, in Schopenhauer’s terms, the “genius” does in order to break in to Schopenhauer’s circle; he has

> the capacity for knowing independently of the principle of sufficient reason, and hence for knowing not individual things (which have their existence only in their relations) but the Ideas of such things, and of being in relation to these things oneself the correlative of the Idea, and thus no longer an individual, but the pure subject of knowing. (118)

The reader, then, must similarly become a “pure subject of knowing” and cast off his dualistic modes of thinking. Again, Schopenhauer refers to this transcendence of individuality as a sort of magic, and as soon as one relapses into duality, “the magic is at an end” (122). But while the perceiving subject is renouncing his individuality, “as pure subject of knowledge, freed from the miserable self, [he] become[s] entirely one with these
objects... The world as idea alone remains, and the world as will has dis-
appeared” (122-23). This World as Idea is the same impenetrable discursive reality that Schopenhauer constructs in the first two books, in which the perceiving subject is simultaneously also the idea. For Schopenhauer, the realization of this reality is the aesthetic experience, and the only way for the reader to enter the discursive reality of The World as Will and Idea is to renounce his own individuality and to become the first subject who declares, “The world is my idea.”

“La escritura del Dios,” on the other hand, ends with a curious duality; Tzinacán, still self-conscious, still narrating in first-person, distances himself from Tzinacán, el otro who had obtained the divine utterance: “Ese hombre ha sido él y ahora no le importa. Qué le importa la suerte de aquel otro, qué le importa la nación de aquel otro, si él, ahora es nadie. Por eso no pronuncio la fórmula, por eso dejo que me olviden los días, acostado en la oscuridad” (165). The Tzinacán who has shed his sense of self in order to reach the divine has become no one, but, simultaneously and paradoxically, he has also become an other for Tzinacán the narrator. Just as Borges does in “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” Tzinacán pulls back from the edge at the last minute; in fact, this is what makes it possible for him to tell his story. An entity that has achieved unity with the universe does not have the necessary dualistic framework to even conceive of narrative.

Similarly, in “Las ruinas circulares,” the dreamer is also a dreamed man, but he is not necessarily the same dreamed man that his dreams beget; in fact, at the end of the story, the dreamer realizes that otro, an other, is dreaming him. Even in his fictions, Borges does not completely close off the narrative world to create an impenetrable, monistic whole; he allows a bridge between the reader and the text, the bare minimum assumption of self and other. Borges uses the structures of narrative and therefore of our own phenomenal reality—time, space, causality, individuality—and re-configures them to create hypothetical worlds that the reader can hold as a mirror to his own world. He doesn’t deny reality; in fact, he

4 In a similar vein, Borges ends “Nueva refutación del tiempo” with this quote from Angelus Silesius: “Go and yourself become the text, yourself the essence” (trans. Dapía 147).

5 This is also what the narrator in “El Aleph” realizes: “¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca?” (El Aleph 224).
considers a fiction as “un plano ideal” that intersects reality (*Otras inquisiciones* 29). The real world of the reader and the discursive world of the text are mediated by the narrator, by (non-magical) words, even by the occasional reminder that, however attractively logical an Ideal world is, it is the construction of a human mind. On the other hand, *The World as Will and Idea*, as a discursive world, is a unique fiction. It slowly erodes and, by the fourth book, eventually does away with time, space, causality and individuality. Moreover, it does not present itself as an ideal plane that intersects the reader’s reality; it demands itself as a replacement for the reader’s reality. Consequently, Sturrock’s reading of the reader as perceiving subject and the text as an objectification of the author’s Will is decidedly too superficial; the reader, too, is merely a phenomenon of the Will. Schopenhauer’s world is more “perverse” than any of Borges’s because it draws the reader into its irrefutably logical conclusions: idea and Will, subject and object, reader and text are all eventually unified. His initial statement that theoretical egoism, if it were a serious conviction, “could be found only in a madhouse” (37) is attractively realistic, but as the text pushes onwards, madness is increasingly praised; in the third book, the madman is compared to the genius in the way in which he “accurately recognizes discrete elements in the present, and also in the past, but that he mistakes the connection, the relationship of one thing to another” (117). This is precisely the same faculty that allows the genius to cast off the principles of sufficient reason and become a “pure subject of knowing.” By the fourth book, it is not only the madman and the genius who discard the relationship of events in time; future and past “exist only in concept” (118), and only the present really exists.

But Schopenhauer goes even further, taking the opposite position from the Borges of “Nueva refutación del tiempo”; to deny time itself is not merely a secret consolation, but a natural and logical step in his discourse. Borges, in his stories, compares the world to a dream; for Schopenhauer, the world finally is a dream, and consequently void. In the third book, the reader had to deny the Will and his own autonomy in order to

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6 This is the very opposite of what Borges wishes to achieve: “Il y a des gens qui croient que j’écris ces contes comme des fables, disons, pour convaincre quelqu’un. Ce n’est pas ça. Je crois que j’ai pensé à l’irréalité du monde comme à des sujets utilisables par la littérature et non parce que cela correspond à ma croyance personnelle” (de Milleret 72-73).
gain access to a world of pure ideas, but even this aesthetic experience is only an illusion (122). By denying the Will, one denies all ideas, since they are all merely phenomena of the Will:

with the free denial, the surrender of the will, all those phenomena are also suspended... all the grades of objectivity... the varieties of forms succeeding one another in gradation... and finally, also its universal form of this manifestation, time and space, and also its ultimate fundamental form, subject and object—all are suspended. No will: no idea, no world. (261)

In the previous three books, Schopenhauer went to great lengths to unify the perceiving subject and the object, the reader and the text. The reader, by casting off his individuality, “becomes one” with the text, existing in the World as Idea. But by finally denying all ideas, Schopenhauer denies the reader himself. Borges never went that far.

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