

STORIA E LETTERATURA

RACCOLTA DI STUDI E TESTI

305

ASTONISHMENT

ESSAYS ON WONDER FOR PIERO BOITANI

edited by

EMILIA DI ROCCO



ROMA 2019
EDIZIONI DI STORIA E LETTERATURA

Prima edizione: marzo 2019

ISBN 978-88-9359-273-4
eISBN 978-88-9359-274-1

Volume pubblicato con il contributo di “Sapienza” – Università degli Studi di Roma,
Dipartimento di Studi Europei, Americani e Interculturali

*È vietata la copia, anche parziale e con qualsiasi mezzo effettuata
Ogni riproduzione che eviti l'acquisto di un libro minaccia la sopravvivenza di un modo di trasmettere la conoscenza*

Tutti i diritti riservati

EDIZIONI DI STORIA E LETTERATURA
00165 Roma - via delle Fornaci, 38
Tel. 06.39.67.03.07 - Fax 06.39.67.12.50
e-mail: redazione@storiaeletteratura.it
www.storiaeletteratura.it

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction. Why Wonder?</i> di EMILIA DI ROCCO	VII
<i>Tabula gratulatoria</i>	XV
PART I A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE	
TERENCE CAVE, <i>Wonder as a Mode of Thought: Aristotle, George Eliot, Marilynne Robinson</i>	3
PETER DRONKE, <i>Meravigliarsi: dall'antichità al Duecento</i>	17
JEAN-PIERRE SONNET, <i>He Who Makes Wonders. God's Mirabilia in the Hebrew Bible between Narrative and Poetry</i>	31
MICHAEL FINKENTHAL, <i>From Marvelous Complexity to the Complexity of the Marvelous</i>	49
MARCO TAVANI, <i>Double Wonder: the Effectiveness of Mathematics in Physics</i>	59
ZHANG LONGXI, <i>Mirror of Enigma and Mirror of Magic: a Comparative Study</i>	71
AZADEH YAMINI HAMEDANI, <i>Wonder in the Flesh: Boitani in Santa Barbara MMIX</i>	87
NICK HAVELY, <i>On the Tuscan Apennines: Wonders and Warfare</i>	97

PART II

FROM THE BIBLE TO CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

EDMONDO F. LUPIERI, "E stupii vedendola, con grande stupore" (Ap. 17,6). <i>Noterelle semiserie ed a tratti lamentose in onore di Piero Boitani</i>	115
EMILIA DI ROCCO, <i>Towards the "stordimento d'animo": Dante from Wonder to Astonishment</i>	129
ANDREA A. ROBIGLIO, <i>Aquinas on Recognition</i>	153
MARIA LUISA ARDIZZONE, <i>The Wondrous Humble Plant of Purgatorio I (vv. 133-136). Introducing a Lost Meaning of the Second Cantica in Dante's Commedia</i>	165
GUR ZAK, <i>Boccaccio's Ulysses and the Limits of Heroism</i>	179
GRETCHEN HENDRICK – FREDERICK M. BIGGS, <i>Decameron 3.9 and the Wife of Bath's Tale</i>	195
BARRY WINDEATT, <i>Chaucer and Wonder</i>	205
JON WHITMAN, <i>Wonderment: Apprehending the Arthurian World</i>	219
PETER KUON, "Vis noua monstra?" <i>Thomas More's Response to New World Travelogues</i>	229
FRANCESCA BUGLIANI KNOX, <i>From Admiration to Wonder: A Reading of John Donne's Anniversaries</i>	243
DOMINIQUE JULLIEN, <i>Wonder in Borges: the Final Chapters</i>	261
MAY HAWAS, <i>Some Observations on the Mediterranean Sublime: From C. P. Cavafy to Elena Ferrante</i>	277
JOERG O. FICHTE, <i>Daniel Kehlmann's Tyll Ulenspiegel in Wonderland: His Wondrous Survival in the Time of War and Witchcraft</i>	293
<i>Index of Names</i>	311

Introduction

WHY WONDER?

Zum Erstaunen bin ich da.
J. W. Goethe, *Parabase*¹

During a discussion on the nature of knowledge, lost in wonder in front of *Theaetetus*, Socrates replies that his "feeling of wonder shows that [he is] a philosopher since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumas made a good genealogy"². In tracing the lineage of this passion, not only does Socrates tie wonder and knowledge in a binding knot fraught of momentous implications, but, by misinterpreting *thauma* and the etymology of *thaumazein*, he also suggests some aspects that will be further developed in the future. The genealogy, however, is incomplete: Iris, as we read in the *Theogony*, is not an only child, and a well-read reader would recall almost immediately the passage where Hesiod writes that Thaumas also begot the Harpies³. In fact, to make wonder the father of the messengers of the gods implies somehow its pervasive presence in the universe, from heaven to the underworld, when we consider that Iris links heaven and earth while the Harpies occasionally carry the dead to Hades. Moreover, it foreshadows the terrible aspect of wonder related to awe in that the Harpies, originally beautiful, by Plato's time have become awesome monsters, ugly birds who stink and are unceasingly hungry. The association

¹ J. W. Goethe, *Parabase*, in Id., *Werke*, herausgegeben von E. Trunz, München, Beck, 1981, vol. I, p. 358 (Hamburger Ausgabe).

² All quotations are from *Plato II Theaetetus Sophist*, with an English translation by H. N. Fowler, London, Heinemann, New York, Putnam's Sons, 1921, 195d, p. 55. Sylvania Chrysakopoulou has analyzed the idea of wonder in the dialogues of Plato also considering pre-platonic views on the subject (S. Chrysakopoulou, *Wonder and the Beginning of Philosophy in Plato*, in *Practices of Wonder. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, edited by S. Vasalou, Cambridge, James Clarke & Co, 2012, pp. 88-120). On wonder in Plato see also P. Pinotti, *Aristotele Platone e la meraviglia del filosofo*, in *Il meraviglioso e il verosimile tra antichità medioevo*, a cura di Diego Lanza – Oddone Longo, Firenze, Olschki, 1989, pp. 29-55.

³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 265-266 and 780.

But Elizabeth would not accept Donne's second 'offering', namely the second anniversary, as a return for benefits she has bestowed, did the poem not bear, like a coin, the stamp of God. Praising and admiring Elizabeth would not suffice. Here Donne defines once for all the nature of his poem. "The purpose" and "authority", he writes, are God's alone¹⁰⁶. God wanted Elizabeth to act well in life and Donne to write the poem in her praise, in order that she might be "a pattern to posterity for life and death". And such a pattern she was and is, for life and for death. She is "the proclamation", Donne specifies, and he, Donne, is "the trumpet at whose voice the people came"¹⁰⁷. Without any doubt the king who sends the "proclamation" to "the people" is no one else but God. God wishes that the full wonder of Elizabeth's example be revealed to his people, in short, that "salvation is nigh", as Donne had proclaimed in *La Corona*.

The means by which God gathers his people is, Donne suggests, the poet's poetic gifts. The voice of the poet, in unison with the mental voice of the reader in meditation and contemplation, becomes, in the *Anniversaries*, the 'trumpet' of higher truths of Wisdom which can be tasted only individually. The poetic voice leads the readers from admiration and praise of Elizabeth to the foretaste of the wonder of the beatific vision when, "like a body compelled by the force of gravity into the very source and centre of its attraction, we come to eternal rest"¹⁰⁸. It is indeed in this capacity to "emprison the ultimate if mysterious reality of God's involvement in the world"¹⁰⁹ that Poetry itself becomes, for Donne, the instrument of wonder.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, I, 526.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, II, 527-528.

¹⁰⁸ R. H. J. Steuart SJ, *The Beatific Vision*, "The Spectator" (12 April 1930), p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ A. Presti Russell, "Thou seest mee strive for life": *Magic, Virtue, and the Poetic Imagination in Donne's Anniversaries*, "Studies in Philology", IV (1998), pp. 374-410: 404.

DOMINIQUE JULLIEN

WONDER IN BORGES: THE FINAL CHAPTERS

Wonder, as Piero Boitani points out in the opening pages of his beautiful book *The Shadow of Ulysses*, is the source of both philosophy and poetry. It holds the Pheacians under a spell as they listen to Ulysses telling his "wondrous deeds" which "bewitch like the poetry of Phemios or the song of the Sirens"¹, just as it urges the young Theaetetus to seek out the causes of nature's mysteries, causing Socrates to tell him: "This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin"². According to Piero Boitani, "In the beginning was (and is) wonder, the source of *logos* and *mythos*. What unites philosophy, science, and poetry is the desire which human beings as such, by nature, have to know"³. The common English translation for Plato's *thaumazein*, wonder, captures both the affective and the intellectual dimensions of the Greek word – the sense of awe, of spellbound bewilderment in front of the universe, as well as the curious, inquisitive mind, hungry for rational explanations of its mysteries. It also retains something of the extraordinary that attaches to events or deeds that break the prosaic routine of daily life. Wonder – or *maravilla* – is also a key word in Borges's writings, and the title of one of his late stories. In the following pages I would like to offer a few speculations on the meaning of wonder in the Borgesian universe, starting with his twilight story *Undr*, published in 1975 in *The Book of Sand*⁴.

The story draws on Borges's love affair with the Icelandic sagas. Apocryphally attributed to Adam of Bremen, the narrative takes us to a

¹ P. Boitani, *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth*, translated by A. Weston, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 5.

² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d, translated by F. M. Cornford, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by E. Hamilton – H. Cairns, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 860.

³ Boitani, *The Shadow of Ulysses*, p. 7.

⁴ J. L. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by A. Hurley, New York, Penguin Books, 1998. All quotations from the fictions refer to this edition.

semi-mythical Viking world, among a fictional people, the Urns, whose literature is condensed into a single magic word. Traveling widely in quest of that word, the hero, Ulf Sigurdarsson, receives the protection of an older poet, Bjarni Thorkelsson, who saves him from the hostility of the local king but refuses to reveal the secret word to him, because “everyone must discover it for himself”. A long life of adventures, battles and love follow. “Thus began the adventure that was to last for so many winters (...) I was oarsman, slave merchant, slave, woodcutter, robber of caravans, cantor, assayer of deep water and of metals (...)”⁵. Ulf at last returns to the land of the Urns in search of the old poet, who reveals the magic word in his dying breath: “He spoke the word *Undr*, which means *wonder*”⁶.

The story’s features are typical of Borges’s late fictions, which tend to reprise key themes, distributing and reconfiguring them in new settings. The central conceit of “*Undr*”, the dream of an entire poetic tradition compressed into a single spell-like word, is a variation on a similar device at the heart of *The Mirror and the Mask* in the same collection, where the last poem the poet recites for the king is a single magic line of devastating impact⁷. But it also echoes the earlier *Parable of the Palace*, from *The Maker*, with its magically destructive single line or single word⁸. And of course it can also be traced back to the famous story *The Aleph* where the narrator, ‘Borges’, experiences a vision of the entire universe condensed into a magical point hidden in the cellar of an ordinary Buenos Aires house⁹.

The plot of *Undr* layers key motifs that have inhabited Borges from the early iconic stories of the forties, rewriting them in a new form and even, perhaps, hinting at a way out of the aporetic epiphany that is Borges’s signature ending. If, as Evelyn Fishburn has argued, there are two main types of Borgesian revelations – the vision of the meaning of universe (such as the epiphany experienced by the martyred priest Tzinacán in *The Writing of the God*)¹⁰ and the moment in an individual’s life when a flash of insight into

⁵ Id., *Collected Fictions*, p. 458.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 459. Efraim Kristal comments on the mysterious word as a fusion of *Und* (German for and) and *ur* (the beginning or archetype): in this sense, the word *undr* contains all possible stories, since all stories have an origin (an “ur”) and a continuation (an “und”), E. Kristal, *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare’s Memory*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, edited by E. Williamson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 160-171: p. 162.

⁷ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 453.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 318.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

the meaning of that life occurs, for instance in *A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)*¹¹, – the ending of *Undr*, remarkably, combines the two: the individual life’s meaning is fused with the single-word revelation of an entire poetic universe. *Undr*, and in particular its mysterious magic word, I suggest, point the way to a possible resolution of the foundational Borgesian tensions – between dreamer and dreamed, arms and letters, life and art.

1. “*Fate is partial to repetitions, variations, symmetries*”.

In *Undr* the Borgesian method of invention as recombination reaches new heights. “Perhaps universal history is the history of the various intonations of a few metaphors”, Borges concludes at the end of his essay *Pascal’s Sphere*¹². Similarly, Borgesian plots follow the law of “repetition, variation, symmetry” laid out in the parable *The Plot*; they are repeatedly reshuffled in time and space, reconfigured into Chinese, Icelandic, Irish, Greek, Argentine, Maya, or Arab stories. This practice is consistent with Borges’s global view of literature, expressed most forcefully in the essay *The Argentine Writer and Tradition* as a defiant claim to universality: “We must believe that the universe is our birthright and try out every subject”¹³. Bursting free from narrow national boundaries, the cultural diversity of Borges’s texts forms a variegated and mobile background to archetypal, recurring plots.

This is not to say that Borges’s stories follow a one-size-fits-all plot painted over with token splashes of local color. His Viking stories, *Undr* especially, are informed by a lifelong interest and expertise, drawing deeply on his earlier scholarly work on ancient Germanic literatures, such as the 1933 essay on Kenningar, the 1953 essay *The Scandinavian Destiny*, or the 1966 handbook on Medieval Germanic literatures¹⁴. It also bears remembering

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 212. E. Fishburn, “This Imminence of a Revelation: A Study of Epiphanies in Borges’s Fictions”, in *Hidden Pleasures in Borges’s Fiction*, Borges Center, Pittsburgh (PA), The University of Pittsburgh, 2015, pp.173-187: p. 174.

¹² J. L. Borges, *Selected Non Fictions*, edited by E. Weinberger, New York, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 353. *The Plot* condenses this idea in parable form: the gaucho’s death at the hands of his godson reenacts Julius Caesar’s murder so that history can be repeated. “Fate is partial to repetitions, variations, symmetries (...) He dies, but he does not know that he has died so that a scene can be played out again” (Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 307).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 427.

¹⁴ J. L. Borges, *Las kenningar*, in *Historia de la eternidad, Obras completas*, Barcelona, Emecé, 1989, I, p. 368. *The Scandinavian Destiny*, a later essay which contains some of the earlier material, is included in *Selected Non Fictions*, p. 377. *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (co-authored with María Esther Vásquez), 1966, online: www.LibrosTauro.com.ar. The two essays overlap with the later handbook in some important particulars that find their way into *Undr*.

that the last *Prologue* Borges wrote, significantly, was devoted to Snorri Sturluson's *Saga of Egil-Skallagrimsson*¹⁵. Characters' names in *Undr* (Ulf, Orm, Gunnlaug) are borrowed from the sagas, as are many of the details: Odin sacrificed to himself, the runic epitaph found on the Black sea shore, the Icelandic name of Constantinople, Mikkelgard, or the sultan's Viking guards¹⁶. The praise poem that Ulf recites for Gunnlaug, the king who wants to kill him, is inspired by a similar episode in the *Saga of Egil-Skallagrimsson* (where Egil saves his head by composing a *drapa* for king Eirik) – and also in the life of Snorri Sturluson himself, whose panegyric of king Hakon earned him the king's pardon¹⁷.

But at the same time, specifics of time and place are subordinate to the breadth of the journey. In a way, a Viking hero is the perfect vehicle for this late story, as Borges was particularly aware of the global reach of the Viking civilization, whose ships sailed to “the most heterogeneous points of the globe”¹⁸. “Viking epitaphs are scattered across the face of the earth”, Borges comments, while “Greek and Arab coins (...) are often discovered in Norway”¹⁹. Ulf Sigurdarsson, the hero of Borges's fictional skaldic odyssey, is less an individual character than a compendium of Viking heroes, condensing all their historical voyages into his archetypal life's wanderings.

Undr, then, transcends particulars of geography and culture. This is also true of history and politics, which are seen here *sub specie aeternitatis*. The king's hostility toward the poet is another recurring motif in Borges's writings, and one which acquired a painful personal dimension beginning with the Perón years, when Borges found himself politically at odds with the demagogue²⁰. The threat to Ulf Sigurdarsson's life, and the poet's salvation by eulogy, are directly borrowed from similar plots in the sagas: yet they also resonate with events in Argentine history. The story is inseparable from contemporary political concerns, while simultaneously untethering the conflict of art and politics from chronology. When Ulf Sigurdarsson returns to the

¹⁵ Id., *Biblioteca personal: prólogos*, Madrid, Alianza editorial, 1998, p. 128.

¹⁶ “Undr”, CF 456, 458; see *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, 30, 29, 35.

¹⁷ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 456; Snorri Sturluson, *Egil's saga*, translated by Bernard Scudder, *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, New York, Penguin Classics, 2001, pp. 108-119; *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, 46. Also noteworthy is the fact that Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue was another legendary poet-king, the hero of a 13th-century saga, translated in 1869 by William Morris, who is mentioned several times in Borges's essays, for example in “Las kenningar”, Borges, *Obras Completas*, I, p. 379. On the Borgesian poet-king motif see below.

¹⁸ Id., *Selected Non Fictions*, p. 377.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 378-379.

²⁰ See E. Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, London, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 322.

country of the Urns, the king who had threatened him has died: “As was the custom, I inquired after the health of the king. ‘His name is no longer Gunnlaug’, he replied. ‘Now his name is other’”²¹. The erasure of individual identities, subsumed and transcended by the cyclical nature of tyranny, is also clear in *The Other* (another story in *The Book of Sand*), where the older Borges gives his younger self a preview of the political future marked by timelessness: “As for history (...) There was another war, with virtually the same antagonists. France soon capitulated; England and America battled a German dictator named Hitler – the cyclical battle of Waterloo. Buenos Aires engendered another Rosas in 1946 (...)”²².

Thus the recurrence of plots and patterns serves both as a method of composition and a philosophical statement. As befits a twilight story, *Undr* offers an exceptionally rich array of such variations on earlier motifs²³. In addition to reprising the epiphanic Aleph motif –the all-containing point – *Undr* is also the mirror image of *The Library of Babel*, as Borges explicitly states in the Afterword: “‘The Library of Babel’, written in 1941, envisions an infinite number of books; *Undr* and *The Mirror and the Mask* envision age-old literatures consisting of but a single word”²⁴. This conceit, in turn, overlaps partially with *Parable of the Palace*, where the confrontation between the poet and the Yellow Emperor culminates in a single-line or single-word poem that contains “the entire enormous palace, whole and to the last detail”²⁵; arguably, is also traceable much earlier, in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* where “there are famous poems composed of a single enormous word”²⁶.

Undr, a saga-inspired story about the making of a poet, is also a variation on the earlier story *The Maker*. Ulf Sigurdarsson is a warrior-poet, a Homer-like figure who meets his poetic destiny at the end of a life of adventure; the main life events (the battles, the love of a slave woman – or as *The Maker*

²¹ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 458.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 413.

²³ I vigorously reject Gene H. Bell Villada's negative appraisal of Borges's late works. The “troublesome limitations” he criticizes in them (*Borges and his Fiction, A Guide to his Mind and Art*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2000, p. 247) seem to apply rather to his own critical acumen.

²⁴ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 485.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 318.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 73. The name of the fictional tribe – the Urns – contains another allusion to *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, whose narrator works on a Spanish translation of Robert Browne's meditation of death and immortality, *Urn Burial*.

put it, "Ares and Aphrodite")²⁷ return as memories, then as the substance of the poem. The story of a Viking Ulysses-turned-Homer also rewrites *The Immortal*, where the Protean hero lives through realms and empires as a soldier, a traveler, a scholar, a storyteller, ultimately absorbing his many identities in death. "In the course of time I have been many men", Ulf Sigurdarsson confides²⁸, and Cartaphilus "I have been Homer; soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men – I shall be dead"²⁹.

The hero's circular itinerary is another key motif. Ulf eventually circles back to his point of departure to meet the dying poet who first set him on his adventurous course by refusing to reveal the Word, until such time when Ulf is ready to receive it. This pattern of quest and return rewrites *The Story of the Two Dreamers*³⁰, Borges's reworking of the 1001 Nights story *The Ruined Man who Became Rich Again Through a Dream*: the treasure was always at home, but could only be discovered after wandering far from home³¹.

2. "Tell me of your travels". Epiphany and intersubjectivity.

Finally, the relationship between the younger poet Ulf Sigurdarsson and the older poet Bjarni Thorkelsson in *Undr* also reworks another recurring Borgesian pattern: the encounter between an older and younger self, the basis for *The Other*, as well as the earlier parable *Borges and I* (from *The Maker*) and the later story *August 25, 1983* (from *Shakespeare's Memory*)³². Remarkably, the encounter in "Undr" ends on a peaceful note of shared revelation. Thorkelsson's dying words are "You have understood me"³³. The confrontation with the double, so fraught with tension throughout Borges's work, here substitutes hostility with reconciliation. The story is a dramatic departure from other narrative variants, where emotions toward alter ego figures range from mild annoyance to hatred. In *Undr* the younger man receives help and protection from the older man, reversing the tragic turn of events in the earlier, iconic story *The South*³⁴. Whereas in *The South* Juan

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 293.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 458.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 194.

³⁰ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 56.

³¹ On this story see U. Marzolph – R. van Leeuwen, *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, ABC Clio, 2004, I, pp. 353-354.

³² Borges, *Collected Fictions*, pp. 411, 324, 489.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 459.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

Dahlmann's encounter with the old gaucho – at once a personification of destiny and a competing symbol of Argentine identity – spelled death for the younger man forced into a duel he was sure to lose, in *Undr*, by contrast, the older authoritative figure not only willingly shares his secret word (*undr*), but also validates the younger character's experience by accepting that it will translate differently. "In his song, and in his chord, I saw my own labors, the slave girl who had given me her first love, the men I had killed (...) I took up the harp and sang – a different word"³⁵.

This new emphasis on the intersubjective dynamics of the revelatory experience means that Ulf Sigurdarsson escapes the solipsistic fate of earlier characters who underwent incomplete or even doubtful epiphanies. The vision of the Aleph, far from leading to a communion of the two initiates, becomes a tool of refined vengeance for the narrator, who denies Carlos Argentino Daneri's epiphanic experience altogether and pretends to think him mad³⁶. The revelation has been wasted on both poets – as in a trade war, there are only losers. Solipsism also creates a tragic limitation for Borges's fictional Averroes who, struggling to understand the meaning of Aristotle's words *tragedy* and *comedy*, ignores the clues provided to him, first by the children play-acting outside his window, then by the traveler who attempts to describe the Chinese theater at the dinner party. Incapable of engaging with these other minds, Averroes, "bounded within the circle of Islam" dooms his transcultural quest to failure, while his alter ego, Borges, unable to imagine Averroes just as Averroes was unable to imagine a play, mirrors this "process of defeat" (*Averroes' Search*)³⁷. But the ending of *Undr*, on the contrary, makes the revelation contingent upon an exchange and a communion. Ulf Sigurdarsson sees his own life in Bjarni Thorkelsson's poem, while Thorkelsson sings his poem in response to Sigurdarsson's story; what elicits "wonder" in him is the detailed recital of the other man's adventures: "Tell me of your travels"³⁸.

3. Arms and letters.

Not only do the two *skalds* in *Undr* share in a common and mutually dependent epiphany: they also place in a harmonious continuum the doer of deeds and the singer of words. Juan Dahlmann's violent death in *The*

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 459.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 284.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 241.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 458.

South brought to its climax an irreconcilable conflict between a life spent in books and a life of action. Perhaps Dahlmann's association with the *1001 Nights* (a book about saving lives through storytelling, though it will not help him) ironically underlines this fatal clash, since, as is well known, Borges's most beloved version was the one by Captain Richard Burton, the legendary scarfaced adventurer. In his essay on *The Translators of the 1001 Nights* Borges praised Burton as a "man of words and deeds"³⁹, something Dahlmann – and Borges – were emphatically not. The conflict between words and deeds is also the beating heart of *The Maker*. For its unnamed hero, the transition from warrior to poet – from deeds to words – is a harsh and painful one. The future Homer possessed no introspective or poetic inclinations until he was robbed of his eyes. "He had never lingered among the pleasures of memory. Impressions, momentary and vivid, would wash over him"⁴⁰. Giving up life in exchange for memory (like Funes, confined to his bed at age nineteen after falling from a horse) is the hard bargain that the muse drives.

For Ulf Sigurdarsson however, fate is kinder. Poetic revelation comes as a crowning conclusion to a long life of adventures, without requiring the sacrifice of his eyesight or his limbs. In his ability to be a man of words and deeds, Sigurdarsson resembles Egil, the legendary warrior-poet of Snorri Sturluson's saga, who, as Borges reflects in his last prologue, handled with equal deftness the metaphor and the sword: "fue un guerrero, un poeta, un conspirador, un caudillo, un pirata y un hechicero (...) Fue diestro en el manejo de la espada, con la que mató a muchos hombres, y en el manejo de la métrica y de la intrincada metáfora"⁴¹. Perhaps not having to choose is Sigurdarsson's privilege because his life, active though it was, was spent in search of poetry: "In the course of time I have been many men, but that whirlwind of events was one long dream. The essential thing always was the Word"⁴². It could be said that while living the life of arms Ulf gave precedence to the life of letters. In a surprising intertextual twist, *Undr*, despite its Scandinavian background, takes us back to a foundational motif of the Borgesian imaginary, the discourse on arms and letters at the heart of *Don*

³⁹ Borges, *Selected Non Fictions*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ Id., *Collected Fictions*, p. 292.

⁴¹ Id., *Biblioteca personal: Prólogos*, Madrid, Alianza editorial, 1988, p. 128. (He was a warrior, a poet, a conspirator, a warlord, a pirate and a wizard [...] He was skilled at handling the sword, with which he killed many men, and at handling metrics and the intricate metaphor. Translation mine).

⁴² Id., *Collected Fictions*, p. 458.

*Quixote*⁴³. Pierre Menard's paradoxical defence of arms against letters⁴⁴ haunts the dichotomy at the heart of *Undr*, casting a dream-like shadow over the later Viking tale.

4. *The Quixotic predicament.*

Justifying the literary life against the heroic life is a preoccupation that runs through Borges's entire work, as is well known. Don Quixote is the main figure that personifies the guilty conscience of a writer who suffered from a feeling of inadequacy and betrayal of his glorious ancestors, whose epic lives seemed to dwarf and mock his bookish destiny. "Few things have happened to me, though many things I've read", Borges notes famously, in the melancholy *Afterword* to *The Maker*⁴⁵. Menard, the timid ivory tower intellectual given to invisible labors, ironically defending by proxy a heroic career closed to him, fictionalized Borges's feelings, at the same time complicating both the conflict and the verdict.

The tension between living and dreaming crystallized in the pair Quijano-Quixote, into which Borges read his own anxieties. As Robin Lefere pointed out, Alonso Quijano became an alter ego, a mirror for self-criticism often expressed most acutely in Borges's poetry⁴⁶. The sonnet *Readers*, from *The Self and the Other*, imagines Alonso Quijano as a dreamer who remained in the library, never acting out his wondrous romances of chivalry: "Always on the edge of an adventure | he never actually left his library". In this Alonso Quijano is much like Borges himself: "Such is also my luck"⁴⁷. To this passivity of the dreamer-reader is attached the stigma of cowardice that stains so many Borgesian characters⁴⁸. In a 1979 poem, *La fama* [Fame], Borges expresses remorse that he is less than Alonso Quijano who dared to be Don Quixote, to act out his reading fantasy. "No haber salido de mi biblioteca.

⁴³ Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, I, 378.

⁴⁴ Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, in Id., *Collected Fictions*, p. 93.

⁴⁵ Id., *Collected Fictions*, p. 327.

⁴⁶ R. Lefere, *Don Quixote en Borges, o Alonso Quijano y yo*, in *La literatura en la literatura. Actas del XIV simposio de la sociedad española de literatura general y comparada*, Alcalá, Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 2004, pp. 211-219. See especially pp. 216-218.

⁴⁷ J. L. Borges, *Readers*, in Id., *Selected Poems*, edited by A. Coleman, New York, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 199.

⁴⁸ Including Snorri Sturluson, whose inglorious death is dramatized in the sonnet *Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241)*: "En esa tarde sin mañana | Te fue dado saber que eras cobarde" (*El otro, el mismo, Obras Completas*, II, p. 285).

¡Ser Alonso Quijano y no atreverme a ser Don Quijote!⁴⁹ But this painful self-deprecation softens into a happier reconciliation of dream and reality in the final years. A very late prose poem, published a year before Borges's death in *Los conjurados*, speculates that some time in the "indecipherable future", it will be possible for Alonso Quijano to "be Don Quixote without leaving his village and his books", for imagined miracles to be more real than real ones, for life to become a dream⁵⁰. This smoothing of the discord toward a continuity of life and dream is already foreshadowed in an earlier (and little known) essay on the final chapter of *Don Quixote*, in which Alonso Quijano is given the revelation of his existential wanderings and bravely recognizes his error. He was not afraid of those he mistook for giants in his madness, and in his sanity he is not afraid of acknowledging that his life has been a long delusion. Thus Borges praises Quijano for having the courage to be sane again, after praising him for having the courage to be mad. Crucially, departing from the traditional interpretation, Borges views Quijano's return to sanity not as an end to his adventures, but rather as an ultimate adventure, one in which Quijano, having undergone the revelation of his errors, is transformed into a hero of self-awareness⁵¹.

In this way Borges – one of whose unrealized projects in his last weeks of life was a story rewriting the final chapter of *Don Quixote*⁵² – enriches and complicates the long critical tradition focused on Cervantes's playful interweaving of dream and life, bookish hero and adventurous madman, Alonso Quijano and Don Quixote⁵³. The wonder, the *maravilla*, coincides wholly with the reader's experience. The pair that fascinates Borges is not

⁴⁹ *La Juma, La cifra*, in Id., *Obras Completas*, III, p. 325.

⁵⁰ "Alonso Quijano puede ser Don Quijote sin dejar su aldea y sus libros" (*Alguien soñará, Los conjurados*, 1985, in Borges, *Obras Completas*, III, p. 473). Translation mine.

⁵¹ "Convirtiéndose en un héroe del conocimiento (que es otra forma de santidad)", Lefere, *Don Quixote en Borges*, p. 218. On Alonso Quijano's courage Borges writes: "Está bien que ahora, ante esta aventura de lucidez, ante esta aventura final que es más tremenda que las otras, se muestre como siempre valiente. Antes se enfrentó con gigantes o con los que creía gigantes y no tuvo miedo; ahora sabe que toda su vida ha sido un engaño y no tiene miedo" (*Análisis del último capítulo del Quijote*, in *Páginas de Jorge Luis Borges seleccionadas por el autor*, con un estudio preliminar de Al. Jurado, Buenos Aires, Celtia, 1982, p. 207).

⁵² Williamson, *Borges: a Life*, p. 488.

⁵³ Isabel Castells Molina coins the portmanteau word *escrivivir* (writing+living) to describe this oneiric chain binding creator and character (I. Castells Molina, *Cervantes y la novela española contemporánea*, Tenerife, Universidad de La Laguna, 1998, tesis doctoral inédita. 2 vols., I, p. 191; quoted in C. B. Díaz, *Cervantes al pie de la letra: Don Quijote a lomos del "Libro del Mundo"*, in "Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America", XIX [1999], 2, pp. 37-54: 37).

the obvious odd couple (the prosaic Sancho Panza and the chivalrous Don Quixote), but the provincial hidalgo and his oneiric alter ego⁵⁴, the reader-character pair, Quijano-Quixote, the dreamer and the dreamed. Marcel Schwob, one of Borges's most influential sources, a direct inspiration for the early stories *A Universal History of Infamy*, is portrayed in a late prologue as a "maravillado lector", a wonder-struck reader akin to Alonso Quijano. Susceptibility to wonder also characterizes the quixotic heroes of Schwob's *Imaginary Lives* – Major Stede Bonnett, Petronius, Crates, Burke and Hare, and so many others – who so often confuse books and life⁵⁵.

The quixotic ability to wonder at the non-wonderful, to find poetry in prosaic reality, is the particular gift of Alonso Quijano, who dreams up an ideal version of himself in a poeticized reality. What elicits wonder is the fact that his reader's logic – or madness – won out over time. This is the key idea in the famous "Parable of Cervantes", written in the same years as "The Maker". For modern readers of the novel, reality, over time, has been transfigured by poetry: "the prosaic places with names such as El Toboso and Montiel" where Don Quixote pursued his ill-fated adventures and was continually and cruelly "defeated by reality" have become as wondrous as were, to him, the enchanted realms of the romances of chivalry. "For both the dreamer and the dreamed, that entire adventure had been the clash of two worlds; the unreal world of romances and the common everyday world of the seventeenth century. They never suspected that the years would at last smooth away the discord, never suspected that in the eyes of the future, La Mancha and Montiel and the lean figure of the Knight of Mournful Countenance would be no less poetic than the adventures of Sindbad or the vast geographies of Ariosto"⁵⁶.

Something analogous – albeit on the level of an individual reader's memory rather than the formation of a classic in the collective memory – happens in Proust, where the reading experience turns the relationship between book and world inside out: if at first the child reader blocks out the real world to immerse himself in the fictional world of the book, years later, when he remembers the book, images of the real world surrounding him – the world that meant so little to him at the time of the reading and means

⁵⁴ Lefere describes this as Borges's "autointerpretación a partir de la pareja Quijano-Quixote" (Lefere, *Don Quixote en Borges*, p. 217).

⁵⁵ "Como aquel español que por la virtud de unos libros llegó a ser "don Quijote", Schwob, antes de ejercer y enriquecer la literatura, fue un maravillado lector" ("M. Schwob, *Vidas imaginarias*", *Biblioteca personal*, p. 70).

⁵⁶ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 315.

so much now – flood his mind⁵⁷. In *Don Quixote* too, the reversibility of poetic fiction and prosaic reality, which turns drab Spain inside out, comes about, over time, through the “wonder” of reading.

What Alonso Quijano’s reinvention of himself and his world rehearses, then, is the Borgesian idea of literature as a dream⁵⁸. This is clearly seen in one of the most famous episodes in Cervantes’s novel, the proto-Borgesian vision of the Cave of Montesinos⁵⁹, an adventure suspected of being “apocryphal” by its fictional author, Cide Hamete Benengeli⁶⁰. The “wonder” (the *maravilla*) experienced by Don Quixote in the cave of Montesinos offers an aporetic version of the question, making it impossible to find in favor of either reality or dream. Benengeli himself leaves it to the reader to decide if Don Quixote fell asleep in a hole in the ground filled with bats and brambles, or if he entered an underground palace of enchanted knights and ladies⁶¹. But Don Quixote, a few chapters later⁶², comes up with a much more creative solution. Having listened to Sancho’s wildly improbable account of his visions during the flight of the wooden horse Clavileño, he quietly offers him a pact of mutual suspension of disbelief: “Sancho, if you want me to believe what you saw in the sky, I wish you to accept my account of what I saw in the Cave of Montesinos. I say no more”⁶³. This kind of agreement is precisely what fails in *The Aleph*, when the narrator, emerging from his own vision in the cellar as Don Quixote emerged from his adventure in the cave, refuses to validate Carlos Argentino Daneri’s visions, setting the stage for the destruction of the Aleph and also forestalling any poetic benefit from the experience⁶⁴.

⁵⁷ M. Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971, p. 160.

⁵⁸ On this synthesis see R. Pellicer, *Borges y el sueño de Cervantes*, “Variaciones Borges”, XX (2005), pp. 9-31: 22.

⁵⁹ Miguel de Cervantes, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, translated by J. M. Cohen, London-New York, Penguin Books, 1950, II, pp. 22-24.

⁶⁰ Cervantes, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, p. 614.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 624. See Paul Kong (*The Raiders and Writers of Cervantes’ Archive: Borges, Puig, and Marquez*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, pp. 51-52) on the notion of *tropelía*, or undecidability between appearance and reality, as well as Erich Auerbach’s famous reading of the enchanted Dulcinea as a “climax of Don Quixote’s illusion and disillusionment” (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western literature*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 339-340).

⁶² *Ibidem*, II, 46.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, II, 46, p. 735. On the difference between suspension of disbelief and madness see A. Manguel, *A History of Reading*, New York, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 352 (n. 30).

⁶⁴ To my knowledge, Jorge Edwards is the only critic to have remarked on the intertextual connections between the Montesinos episode in *Don Quixote* and the Borges story *The*

5. Conclusion.

“I do not want to be who I am”, says Alonso Quijano in the poem *I Am Not Even Dust*; and later “I will be my dream”. The poem ends with Quijano’s prayer to Cervantes – “My God, my dreamer, keep on dreaming me”⁶⁵. The concentric circles of dreamers that make up this Quixote poem, besides recalling the famous Golem-inspired story *The Circular Ruins*, also provide a clue to *Undr*. A Quixotic template overlays the skaldic story. Ulf Sigurdarsson’s adventurous life (which seemed to him like a dream) can indeed be read as the dream of the other, sedentary old poet. It could all have been a dream – the vicarious adventures dreamed by Bjarni Thorkelsson, playing Alonso Quijano to Ulf’s Don Quixote. This leaves the framing author, Adam of Bremen (to whose pen this saga is apocryphally attributed) as the Benengeli figure in this pattern⁶⁶.

The experience of ‘wonder’ given as an ultimate revelation in *Undr* is, as befits a dream, far beyond any rational intellectual relation to the world. Awe, amazement, bewilderment, ultimately speechlessness: in its mystical ambition to reach beyond epistemology, Borges’s ‘wonder’ in this late story is almost Levinassian, as Lisa Block de Béhar notes⁶⁷. It evokes “the wonder of a mode of thought better than knowledge”⁶⁸ that Lévinas opposed to the Western philosophical tradition wrongly fixated, for him, on questions of knowledge, claiming instead that the philosophical pursuit of knowledge must be secondary to a basic ethical duty to the other⁶⁹. The acknowledgment of the other subjectivity that is key to *Undr* is very close in spirit to Lévinas’s ethical primacy, albeit with an emphasis on the shared epiphanic experience rather than the practical treatment of the other. This ‘wonder’

Aleph: see J. Edwards, *Lectores leídos, escritores contados*, “Estudios públicos”, C (primavera 2005), pp. 51-62 (especialmente 57-61).

⁶⁵ Borges, *Selected Poems*, p. 399.

⁶⁶ On the affinity between the framing and palimpsestic devices in *Don Quixote* and Borges’s fictions see also L. Madrid, *Cervantes y Borges, la inversión de los signos*, Madrid, Pliegos, 1987, in particular pp. 114-126.

⁶⁷ L. Block de Béhar, *Borges: The Passion of an Endless Quotation*, translated by W. Egginton with C. R. Alexander, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2014, pp. 127-128.

⁶⁸ E. Lévinas, *Outside the Subject*, translated by M. B. Smith, London, Athlone Press, 1993, p. 3.

⁶⁹ On Lévinas’s ethical emphasis (“ethics as first philosophy”) see D. Donoghue, *Adam’s Curse: Reflections on Religion and Literature*, Notre Dame (IN), University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, in particular pp. 49-53.

Borges articulates in his late fiction, then, is much more than a philosophical passion, and is best understood in a relational manner.

To the extent that it aims beyond knowledge, that it is not – or not primarily – rational, Borgesian ‘wonder’ also owes a debt to Borges’s relatively under-recognized precursors, the Surrealists. As Delia Ungureanu points out, the transformative power of the poetic experience described in *Undr* is partly modeled on the Surrealist experience of finding wonder in the quotidian. The Borgesian *maravilla* associated with both the Viking poets and Don Quixote is closely allied to the Surrealists’ own magic word, *merveilleux*⁷⁰. At the same time, it is also evocative of another proto-Surrealist precursor, Victor Hugo. The famous incantatory line from *Les Contemplations*, “L’hydre univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres”⁷¹, occupies the climax of the story *The Other*. The two selves that meet on a bench by the river of time – young Borges on the banks of the Rhône, old Borges on the banks of the Charles – are at odds about everything; but one thing can unite them, the poetry of Hugo. The older Borges recites this line to his younger alter ego, eliciting from him the same reaction of bewildered awe described in both *Undr* and *The Mirror and the Mask*⁷². “I slowly intoned the famous line: *L’hydre-univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres*’. I could sense his almost fear-stricken bafflement. He repeated the line softly, savoring each glowing word. ‘It’s true,’ he stammered, ‘I could never write a line like that.’ Hugo had brought us together”⁷³. Hugo’s spell-like poetic line of wonder, equally distant from the laborious riddles of the kenningar (“cold aberrations” of rhetoric that the poet must leave behind)⁷⁴ and from the epistemological overreach of philosophy, is the metaphoric expression of this enchantment of the world.

The alpha and omega of the story, for Thorkelsson the end and for Sigurdarsson the beginning of the poetic journey, ‘wonder’, is cause and effect of the poet’s ability to enchant life. This ability does not reside in the

⁷⁰ D. Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature*, New York-London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 118-119. Ungureanu’s important book fills a critical void, reminding us that Borges was a reader of the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure* (see in particular pp. 80-84), and documenting the overlap between the Borgesian and the Surrealist aesthetics. She also draws a parallel between the Borgesian conceit of the single-word poem and Breton’s 1935 *poème-objet* (p. 118).

⁷¹ V. Hugo, *Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre*, in *Les Contemplations*, Paris, Poésie Gallimard, 1973, p. 391.

⁷² Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 453.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 415.

⁷⁴ “Frias aberraciones” (*Las kenningar*, *Obras Completas*, I, p. 368).

life but in the human living it, as Thorkelsson reminds his younger alter ego: “Life gives all men everything, but most men do not know this”⁷⁵. The elusive justification of life – all lives, any life – is virtually contained in the whispered exchange of aleph-like words, which assumes, at their vanishing point, the equivalency between one life and another, aligning experiences and unlocking, at long last, the quixotic cage of guilt.

⁷⁵ *Id.*, *Collected Fictions*, p. 459. *The Night of the Gifts*, in the same volume, repeats this motif once again: the old man telling the story remembers the distant night during which he was given the archetypal knowledge of love and death which encompasses all experience: “Within the space of a few hours I’d learned how to make love and I’d seen death at first hand. To all men all things are revealed” (p. 450).