ASTONISHMENT
ESSAYS ON WONDER FOR PIERO BOITANI

edited by
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Introduction
WHY WONDER?

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”. 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 Harpies1. 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


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 alone. 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". 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 poet's 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". It is indeed in this capacity to "emprise the ultimate if mysterious reality of God's involvement in the world" that Poetry itself becomes, for Donne, the instrument of wonder.

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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 Sigurðarson, 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 (...)”. 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”.

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 impact. But it also echoes the earlier Parable of the Palace, from The Maker, with its magically destructive single line or single word. 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 house.

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 aporetical 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 Tzínacán in The Writing of the God) and the moment in an individual’s life when a flash of insight into

the meaning of that life occurs, for instance in A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874) – 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. 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”. 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 literatures. It also bears remembering

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9 E.M. Crette, Collects Fictions, p. 459.
10 Ibidem, p. 459. Efrain Kristal comments on the mysterious word as a fusion of Undr (German for and) and Undr (the beginning or archetype): in this sense, the word undr contains all possible stories, since all stories have an origin (an “ur”) and a beginning (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.
11 Borges, Collected Fictions, p. 43.
13 Ibidem, p. 250.
that the last Prologue Borges wrote, significantly, was devoted to Snorri Sturluson’s Saga of Egil-Skallagrímsson. 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 guards. 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-Skallagrímson (where Egil saves his head by composing a drápa for king Eirik) — and also in the life of Snorri Sturluson himself, whose panegyric of king Hakon earned him the king’s pardon.

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”. “Viking epitaphs are scattered across the face of the earth”, Borges comments, while “Greek and Arab coins (...) are often discovered in Norway.” Ulf Sigurðarson, 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 demagogue. The threat to Ulf Sigurðarson’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 Sigurðarson returns to the

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’.” 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 (...).”

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 motifs. 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, envisons an infinite number of books; Undr and The Mirror and the Mask envision age-old literatures consisting of but a single word.” 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”; arguably, is also traceable much earlier, in Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius where “there are famous poems composed of a single enormous word.”

Undr, a saga-inspired story about the making of a poet, is also a variation on the earlier story The Maker. Ulf Sigurðarson 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
put it, "Ares and Aphrodite") 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 confides, 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, Borges' 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 home.

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 23, 1983 (from Shakespeare's Memory). Remarkably, the encounter in "Undr" ends on a peaceful note of shared revelation. Thorkelsson's dying words are "You have understood me". 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. Whereas in The South Juan

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."33

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 mad. 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). 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."34

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

27 Ibidem, p. 293.
29 Ibidem, p. 194.
30 Borges, Collected Fictions, p. 56.
32 Borges, Collected Fictions, pp. 411, 324, 489.
33 Ibidem, p. 459.
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 scarface adventurer. In his essay on The Translators of the 1001 Nights Borges praised Burton as a “man of words and deeds”, 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.” 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 Sigurðarsson 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, Sigurðarsson 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 intricada metafora”. Perhaps not having to choose is Sigurðarsson’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”. 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 Scandinvian background, takes us back to a foundational motif of the Borgesian imaginary, the discourse on arms and letters at the heart of Don Quixote. Pierre Menard’s paradoxical defence of arms against letters 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. 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 poetry. 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 I never actually left his library” In this Alonso Quijano is much like Borges himself. “Such is also my luck”. To this passivity of the dreamer-reader is attached the stigma of cowardice that stains so many Borgesian characters. In a 1979 poem, La fama, 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.

Cervantes, Don Quijote, I, 378.
Borges, Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote, in Id., Collected Fictions, p. 93.
Id., Collectéd Fictions, p. 327.
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 cobardo” (El otro, el mismo, Obras Completas, II, p. 283).
Iser Alonso Quijano y no atrevéme a ser Don Quijote. 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 dream. 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-awareness.

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—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 Quixote. The wonder, the maravilla, coincides wholly with the reader's experience. The pair that fascinates Borges is not the obvious odd couple (the prosaic Sancho Panza and the chivalrous Don Quixote), but the provincial hidalgos and his oneiric alter ego, 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 Steed Bonnett, Petronius, Crates, Burke and Hare, and so many others—who so often confuse books and life.

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. 

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—

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[46] La fonna, La caja, in Id., Obras Completas, III, p. 325.


[48] "Convirtiéndose en unos héroes de 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, with an essay preliminary of Al. Junaro, Buenos Aires, Célula, 1982, p. 207).


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

[52] "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).

so much now - flood his mind37. In *Don Quixote* too, the reversibility of poetic fiction and prosaic reality, which turns dry 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 dream38. This is clearly seen in one of the most famous episodes in Cervantes's novel, the proto-Borgesian vision of the Cave of Montesinos39, an adventure suspected of being "apocryphal" by its fictional author, Cide Hamete Benengeli40. 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 ladies41. But Don Quixote, a few chapters later42, comes up with a much more creative solution. Having listened to Sancho's wildy 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."43. This kind of agreement is precisely what falls 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 Argentineo Daneri's visions, setting the stage for the destruction of the Aleph and also forestalling any poetic benefit from the experience44.

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"45. 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 Sigurðarson'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 Thorkellsson, 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 pattern46.

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, bewildermanr, ultimately speechlessness: in its mystical ambition to reach beyond epistemology, Borges's 'wonder' in this late story is almost Levinasian, as Lisa Block de Béhar notes47. It evokes "the wonder of a mode of thought better than knowledge"48 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 other49. The acknowledgement 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'
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*[^10]. 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 tardant son corps écaille 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 bewilderment and awe described in both *Undr* and *The Mirror and the Mask*[^2].

“I slowly intoned the famous line: ‘L’hydre-univers tardant son corps écaille 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)[^24] 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 Sigurdarson 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 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”[^73]. 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.

[^10]: D. Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlam: 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 concept of the single-word poem and Breton’s 1935 *poème-objet* (p. 118).


[^74]: “Frias aberraciones” (*Las kenningar, Obras Completas*, 1, p. 368).