

“El verso incorruptible”

Jorge Luis Borges and the Poetic Art of the Icelandic Skalds

*If the same words were repeated over and again,
they could fade and become like a shaped coin,
“stiff and dead upon the earth”.*

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Við uppspretturnar*
(*At the Source*).

The kenning as rhetoric (of myth and history)

Around 1220 the Icelandic writer and historian, Snorri Sturluson, wrote a treatise on the rhetoric art of the *skaldic* poetry (“Skáldskaparmál”) which some seven hundred years later was partly reproduced by Borges in Argentina.¹

When Borges wrote his essay on the kennings in 1933, he had not begun his studies of Old Norse and based his observations on translations, into both English and German as indicated by his appendix bibliography. Yet we can suppose that he had already become acquainted with the basic principle behind the kennings when he was a young boy and read *Völsungasaga* in the translation of William Morris

¹ “Las kenningar”, in *Historia de la eternidad*. All references to Borges’ work (unless otherwise stated) are to Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, hereafter referred to as OC. On Snorri and Borges’ fascination and admiration for him see *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (LGM hereafter), the poem “Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241)” (*El otro, el mismo*), and my essay “La alucinación del lector”. Jorge Luis Borges and the legacy of Snorri Sturluson”.

and Eiríkr Magnússon.² There he would have come across archaisms and even coinages from Germanic roots which the translators resorted to in order to capture the ancient and “barbaric” flavour of the original. Perhaps this is why Borges said, in an interview about his studies in Icelandic: “I had already begun that study when I was a boy.” (Barnstone 3)

Snorri’s essay contained a comprehensive list of poetic diction and metaphors which are known to have existed in old Norse poetry since at least the mid-ninth century –or just before the settlement of Iceland– but which for some unknown reason soon became almost an exclusive characteristic of the kind of poetry composed by Icelanders, called *dróttkvæði* or court poetry. Snorri wrote his treatise for young poets, “who desire to learn the language of poetry and to furnish themselves with wide vocabulary using traditional terms; or else they desire to be able to understand what is expressed obscurely” (*Edda* 64), then goes on to say that people should not forget or abandon the old kennings, “which major poets have been happy to use” (64). It was largely thanks to Snorri that Borges could undertake a study of the kennings and the Scandinavian and ultimately Germanic myths.³

In his essay on the kennings Borges mentions some of those which he came across in Morris’s epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung*: “viento de la guerra, el ataque; bosque de picas, el ejército; tejido de la espada, la muerte” (*OC* 1: 380) and in both “Las kenningar” and *Literaturas germánicas medievales* he adds a number of kennings from different times and contexts, equally mythical ones like “león de la triple noche” and more individual inventions such as when a character of Flaubert calls the coffin “sobretudo de pino” (*LGM* 105). Borges has also pointed out an analogy between Baltasar Gracián and the *skalds*, calling both *Skáldska-þarmál* and *Agudeza y Arte de Ingenio*, “herbarios de metáforas”, but he adds that “la primera exponía una tradición y la segunda quería ser el manifiesto de una escuela literaria, el conceptismo” (106)⁴. This is perhaps why he could turn his back on “ultraísmo” without abandoning his admiration for the kennings. In his “Autobiographical Essay” Borges says: “The quaint notion of using, as far as it could be done, meta-

² “A Islandia”, in *El oro de los tigres*, *OC* 2: 511.

³ “Tú, que legaste una mitología / De hielo y fuego a la filial memoria” are Borges’ opening words in the poem about Snorri. On Snorri’s legacy to Scandinavian history and literature see Borges’ *Literaturas germánicas medievales*.

⁴ In Iceland Snorri’s list of kennings proved useful for the poets of the 17th century.

phors instead of straightforward nouns, and of these metaphors being at once traditional and arbitrary, puzzled and appealed to me" (Alazraki *Critical* 50). Partly Borges' lifelong fidelity to the kennings lies here, in that they are a literary tradition, a cultural legacy, as are the most important metaphors of humanity, or as Lynn and Shumway put it:

Cada kenning reviste una cualidad arquetípica, no porque sea una versión de una metáfora esencial como la de tiempo/río, sino porque se hace parte de un profundo entendimiento mutuo entre el bardo y sus oyentes, entre el poeta y sus lectores. (130)

The first known native Icelandic *skald* was Egill Skallagrímsson (born ca. 910), about whom Borges says: "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".⁵ By the time Snorri wrote his essay on rhetorical art the kennings had become set figures, tropes that probably did not retain much novelty after some 400 years of use and abuse; the poets worked hard at creating new kennings, but the artificiality was becoming a dominating trait. Perhaps Snorri sensed it was time to write them down for future generations because a new tide was coming in, when chivalric novels, music and clowns from Southern Europe would soon supplant the highly sophisticated poetry of battles, death and glory. Around the year 1300 the *skalds* stopped reciting their poems in Norway; by then they had already stopped in Denmark and Sweden, partly because the language had changed and the kings no longer understood the *skaldic* verse. There is a stanza which dates from around 1149 by the *skald* Einarr Skúlason which probably reflects changes in both language and literary tastes. The poet visited the court of king Sveinn Eiríksson (Svend Grade) in Denmark but received no reward for his compositions: "The Danish king prefers violins and pipes" he complains. (Frank 93)⁶

Snorri's crucial intuition was that it was vital to preserve the understanding of the poetic diction of *skaldic* verses, because they were not just poetry but also important historical sources that had circulated orally for centuries. He used numerous stanzas when he wrote his masterpiece *Heimskringla*, the history of the kings of Norway, quoting them in between episodes, to provide reference to his historical sources. In his *Edda* Snorri Sturluson relates many old myths in order to explain

⁵ "Snorri Sturluson. *Saga de Egil-Skallagrímsson*". In Borges' *Biblioteca personal* 128.

⁶ According to Roberta Frank the Danes did not appreciate the *skaldic* verse as did the Norwegians and the kings of England, but preferred Latin literature as well as Southern European entertainment, *op.cit* 102.

the allusive epithets used of objects or gods, but towards its end *Skáldskaparmál* becomes “un diccionario (no alfabético) de metáforas”, to quote Borges’ own definition (*LGM* 113). Snorri explains, for instance, why gold is called “lecho de la serpiente”, a kenning which is instantly recognizable to a reader of Borges, its origin being in the story of Sigurd and Fafnir which inspires Borges, the narrator in “El Zahir”, to write his story. It is a kenning which certainly would not mean “gold” unless we knew the story behind it, whereas other kennings enumerated by Snorri (and in many cases by Borges 700 years later) can be defined as “invented” metaphors or periphrasis. Some, indeed, are of the strangest kind, “nos extrañan del mundo” (*OC* 1: 379) as Borges puts it (“pierna de omóplato”, “poste de yelmo”, “delicia de los cuervos”, to mention just a few).

The *skaldic* verse was “royal”, fit for aristocrats and kings, but although the most famous *skalds* did indeed spend time at the courts of the kings of Norway and Denmark and with the earls in the Orkneys where they composed eulogies called *drápur* to celebrate their hosts’ glory and generosity, *skaldic* verses were also composed under other and different circumstances. These were usually inspired by recent incidents, a kind of thumbnail sketch or bulletin about contemporary men or events although mythological references would often be intertwined with them in accordance with the dictates of the convention. Some would celebrate a woman’s beauty, others would glorify the voyage of a ship, yet other verses would lament loss and death. Nonetheless, the favourite theme was that of battle, where swords met and men fell like trees to become “delicacies of the swan of the sweat of the wounding-thorn”, i.e. food for the blood-drinking ravens. Although we could find exceptions (Egill Skallagrímsson’s poignant “Lament for the Loss of his Sons”, for instance), on the whole these poets “had no use for the fail-ures of this world” (Frank 21), they are seldom sentimental or nostalgic.

Formally the *skaldic* verses were extremely complicated and the metre was unknown outside Scandinavia. They consisted of an unlimited number of stanzas of eight lines, having different names depending on the length of the poems (the most esteemed was probably the above-mentioned eulogy or *drápa*, the kind of poem Ulfr Sigurdarson recited to king Gunnlaug in “Undr” (*El libro de arena*), but which, apparently, was not much appreciated by the audience who had found the “Word”). Each line consisted of six syllables and three accents, and the stanza was usually divided into two half-stanzas, each of which made a syntactical and semantical whole. There was regular alliteration, two in each odd-line and one at the beginning of the next, while internal

rhymes were found in each line, consonant rhymes in the even lines and assonance in the uneven ones. This formal regularity probably had a mnemotechnic function as well as giving a musical rhythm to the poem which the *skald* recited. Intonation and performance were probably important; *Egils Saga* tells how Egill Skallagrímsson was given one night to compose a poem called "Head Ransom" in order to make the king of York, Eiríkr Bloodaxe, change his mind about killing him. The morning after he recited his *drápa* in front of the king, who said at the end of the performance: "The poem was well delivered".

We cannot be sure whether king Eiríkr understood much of Egill's poem, because in *skaldic* poetry hardly anything was said in a straightforward manner, everything had to be expressed by circumlocution, and with a very complicated word order, which is a stylistic device permissible in highly inflected languages such as Icelandic, the language spoken then in Scandinavia and even farther afield.⁷ The *hyperbatons* were an important feature of the verses and often the poet would even split a combined word into two parts, inserting other words between them (*tmesis*). A certain tension was created between the strict formal aspect of the poem and the intricate syntax, and the dynamism of compacted, contrasting elements. A further tension appears in the fact that although these poems were both elevated and elegant due to their highly complex form, the poets themselves were no gentlemen; Borges calls them "hiperbóreos hombrones" and some were outright threats to civilized society.⁸ Perhaps it is these tensions, these near-paradoxes, which make the *skaldic* verse an interesting kind of literature to modern man.⁹

In the story of king Harald Sigurdarson (d. 1066) in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, about which Borges writes in his essay "El pudor de la historia" (*Otras inquisiciones*) the king, before going into the fatal battle at Stamford Bridge, composes a simple and straightforward stanza in which he says he is going into battle without his coat of mail called Emma. "This is badly composed", says king Harald (turning to literary

⁷ On the range of this old Scandinavian language see *Literaturas germánicas medievales* and Borges' story "Undr".

⁸ Egill Skallagrímsson, perhaps the greatest of all the skalds, already had a notorious reputation for drunken behaviour when he was three and killed for the first time at the age of seven.

⁹ Still, we should bear in mind that in his essay on the kennings Borges makes no attempt to reproduce the complicated formal characteristics of the *dróttkvæði*. His concern is with the semantic content, not the linguistic form.

criticism before meeting his death) and composes another highly complicated stanza about the same thing. The new stanza speaks of a woman whose identity is unknown, but the woman could also be Emma, his burnie. “The poem thus construed becomes a kind of extended double entendre” (Frank 145) because each word could allude to both a woman and the coat of mail. This kind of reading gives the *skaldic* verse a modern, if not to say Borgesian touch.

The kenning as extended meaning

Yet king Harald’s “correction” also points to an attitude to poetry, namely that poetic language should be elevated, even when composed in the face of death; after all poetry was the language of gods and as *Heimskringla* tells us, Odin, the god of poetry, spoke in verses. Borges denounces this kind of elevated, ornamental language in “Las kenningar” for lacking in a suggestive force. It has been claimed that this kind of language, which seems reluctant to call things, gods or men by their actual names, is born of superstitious taboo, whereby naming a god or the dangers of nature can invoke them: “Periphrasis and metonymy enable men to refer to divinities without risking the disaster that might ensue if the sacred names themselves were to be uttered” (Dixon 35). Or as Borges puts it: “El danés que articulaba el nombre de Thor o el sajón que articulaba el nombre de Thunor no sabían si esas palabras significaban el dios del trueno o el estrépito que sucede al relámpago” (“Prólogo”, *El otro, el mismo*, OC 2: 236). Coupled with the complicated syntax, this circumlocution had the effect that the real meaning of the stanza would often not be clear until the last word had been recited. Even then, people might have to muse over them for a while before “decoding” them. Therefore, as Borges points out in his essay, these poems were often like riddles and coded messages were sometimes expressed through them. In this sense they recall the runes which often embodied hidden messages and were considered to have magical powers. Borges, in his *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, tells how Odin, the god of poetry and wisdom, sacrificed himself to himself in order to gain the wisdom of the runes, which he acquired after nine nights of agony. He also tells how Snorri Sturluson, the night before being killed, received a runic message which he could not decipher. Erik Lönnrot finds himself in a similar, though ironized, situation; Red Scharlach’s nine nights of agony seem to parallel (or parody) the sacrifice of Odin.

In his essay, Snorri Sturluson classifies the poetic diction into three categories, all related to the use of substantives. Things could be called

by their names, their names could be substituted by synonyms or they could be named through kennings. The second category, which Roberta Frank calls appellations (40)¹⁰, are synonyms that designate a thing or person with a more "elevated" word than used in everyday language. This is simply a kind of poetic style and was very common in the *skaldic* verse. The words used are often archaic and hark back to an ancient order, bringing the poet and his audience to the perhaps not so remote times of the Saxon whose "mundo era de magias en los mares,/De reyes y de lobos y del Hado/Que no perdona y del horror sagrado/Que hay en el corazón de los pinares".¹¹ Other appellations were neologisms, often combinations coined by the poets themselves (a feature which links them with baroque poets like Góngora). But the late professor Einar Ólafur Sveinsson identifies as the most interesting aspect of these synonyms when everyday words are used with a different sense in the poem and a tension is generated between the two meanings that are present. For example, when a poet uses a word that etymologically means noise or thunder and he makes it denote battle in his poem, it is more expressive than simply saying battle. When the sea is called dusk, space or suction, it changes, it is never the same sea (40). Such usage of words would seem to indicate a relativistic vision of reality and a desire to grasp the "reality" of the thing perceived, an attempt to make *res* and *verba* coincide. As in the case of the kennings, the meaning of the words is changed by its context and yet the old meaning charges the context in which it is placed with a contingent existence of both meanings. A tension is created through the new meaning, similar, perhaps, to that created by Borges when he uses words in their etymological sense, a tendency which he manifests as early as in "El idioma infinito": "me he remontado al uso primordial de muchas palabras" (*Tamaño* 42). A similar process can be found in Borges' style as both James Irby and Jaime Alazraki (*Prosa*) have shown. The use of words in their etymological sense in Borges has been defined by Irby:

"At times they may serve to "make strange" a commonplace event or object and, by substituting a word of like origin, remind us of the real significance of the root (...)Also, in most cases, (...) Borges takes into account the "corrupted," common meaning as well and makes both it and the etymological "fit" the context and reinforce one another. The contingent and the absolute converge and collaborate strangely". (112-113)

¹⁰ Lee M. Hollander (11) calls them "figures of variation".

¹¹ "Un Sajón, A.D. 449". *El otro, el mismo*. OC 2: 261.

In the cases both of the skalds and of Borges, this figure of language ultimately expresses a vision of a complex, unstable and ambiguous reality.

The kennings, the other class of poetical language referred to by Snorri Sturluson, have normally been classified as metaphors, metaphorical circumlocutions or periphrasis, though they also have a metonymic element, since they often function as figures of contingency as well as of comparison.¹² The word kenning is derived from the expression *kenna við eitthvað*, “to express or describe one thing by means of another” (Frank 42). The simplest form of kenning is made from two nouns which in unison designate a third noun. One noun is called the base word, the other, which normally appears in the genitive, its definer. Neither of them can designate the connotated third object on their own. The kenning “rocío de la espada” can serve as an example of this, when “rocío” acquires an unexpected meaning through its definer or epithet and becomes blood. Each element of the kenning can in turn be expressed by a kenning as Borges points out when he says: “Omito las de segundo grado, las obtenidas por combinación de un término simple con una kenning –verbigracia, el agua de la vara de las heridas, la sangre” (OC 1: 375). Although Snorri Sturluson recommends that no more than five elements should constitute a kenning, the process can of course conceivably be continued *ad infinitum* to make overgrown “*objetos verbales*” like the “*objetos secundarios*” called *hrönir* on Tlön, “los *hrönir* de segundo y de tercer grado –los *hrönir* derivados de otro *hrön*, los *hrönir* derivados de un *hrön* de un *hrön*” (OC 1: 440). Similarly, it is conceivable that the kennings (through the combination of words into one) could be made into “poemas de una sola enorme palabra (...) un objeto poético creado por el autor”. (OC 1: 436)¹³

Although variety is an important feature of the kennings they are derived from a limited stock of about one hundred things, generally referring to some concrete object. Gods, men, women, battle, sea, ship, earth, ice, fire, spear, sword, shield, wound, etc., designated the immediate realities of the times of those “rojos varones”. The kenning creates an essential or underlying tension in the basic icons or emblems by in-

¹² “Metonymy and metaphor may be the characterizing structures of two poetic types –poetry of association by contiguity, and poetry of association by comparison”, Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature* 184-85, quoted from *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 500.

¹³ Some critics (M. H. Lusk, E. Porras Collantes) have already pointed out the similarities of *hrönir* and the kennings. To my knowledge, only Margrét Jónsdóttir has treated the Icelandic subtext in “Tlön...”

voking disparate elements that constitute them. When a ship is called "horse of the sea" there is tension because the two substantives have nothing in common (bear of the yoke is an ox, swan's land is the sea, etc.). The definer almost totally inverts the meaning of the base word and yet the original meanings of the two words coexist with their connotation. The words coexist in an antithetical and contingent relationship, irreconcilable and yet reconciled in the kenning. We notice that the kenning "horse of the sea" carries a wider range of connotation than does the ship *per se*: it evokes motion, life, speed, distance, elemental forces etc. Seafarer as "tree of the horse of the sea" adds stability, life, permanence, age, perhaps even arrogance and pride with its towering height. Similar associations can be made for gold being "bed of the snake" -the kenning evokes not only the myth about Fafnir and the gold of the Nibelungs with all its horrendous connotations, but also something slimy and glittering, cold and repulsive, which the word gold does not evoke. And, ultimately, it is a symbol of condemnation and tragic death. Thus the two words, bed and snake, or the words horse and sea, become united in the kenning and connote a third object which gains qualities that the straightforward word cannot express. "Fused metaphor" or "rounded conception", Roberta Frank calls them. (33)

Each kenning can be rendered as one noun and each stanza can be rendered into everyday language, but with the complete loss of all the connotations and allusions created by the kenning. "*Dróttkvætt* [the skaldic poetry] more than most verse resists paraphrase; it seems inaccessible to the wheat/chaff (or kernel/shell, pit/fruit) method of literary analysis... Medium and message, *significant* and *signifié*, must be seen as one" (Frank 72). The poems, by their form and content, contain a mystery (a challenge) but once each kenning has been rendered the reader is left empty-handed, with "nothing". A paradox arises between the promising wrapping and the intangible content. We can only perceive, not grasp. We are left, as in the baroque ambient of "*desengaño*", with only words; reality, if it exists, is something else. In spite of the distance in time and space, the *skalds'* scepticism is that of Borges, their art "incorporates a view of reality in which man can never fully understand what he has literally observed and heard". (Frank 29)

Borges' attitude

The kennings are figures whose "gigantesca ineptitud embelesó a los rojos varones de los desiertos volcánicos y los fjords, igual que la profunda cerveza y los duelos de padrillos" (OC 1: 378). Judging from Bor-

ges' essay on the kennings alone one cannot but think that they appealed to him as grossly inadequate rhetorical and poetic devices and perhaps even very funny. Yet it should be borne in mind that in spite of their strangeness and possible inadequacy they form part of an ancient tradition ("traditional and arbitrary", Borges said) which was preserved in a country greatly idealized by Borges for both its medieval literature and its language – "ese latín del Norte" ("A Islandia", OC 2: 511)– until he adopted it as a living symbol and memory of the early heroic age of the Germanic peoples. In "Las kenningar" Borges makes it quite clear that he finds the kennings an inadequate and outdated mode of expression, calling them "desfallecidas flores retóricas" (OC 1: 371) with no poetical power, "no provocan imágenes o pasiones". He even insinuates that he compiled a list of them out of pure instinct for collecting, "con un placer casi filatélico".

We know that as a young man Borges was an *ultraísta*, an admirer of the original invention of "new metaphors", who considered the metaphor an essential part of poetry. This attitude would soon change into its opposite: the opinion that all essential metaphors were discovered ages ago, "las que aún podemos inventar son las falsas" ("Nathaniel Hawthorne", OC 2: 48). Obviously, as Borges states in his essay, the kennings appealed to his *ultraísta* tendencies as a writer; the *skalds*, who were "poetas de intención personal" as he puts it (OC 1: 368), were great inventors of both words and metaphors and as such manifested "a desire to outdo all competitors in wit and craftsmanship" (Frank 28). We can suppose that when Borges says at the end of his essay: "El ultraísta muerto que sigue siempre habitándome goza con estos juegos" (OC 1: 380) he is referring to his liking for word play, inventiveness and riddles; but this is not his only response. Elsewhere we find that the kennings instil a typically Borgesian perplexity or bewonderment, despite or perhaps because of their strangeness: "Pueden motivar esa lúcida perplejidad que es el único honor de la metafísica, su remuneración y su fuente". (379)

Even in an apparently straightforward essay such as "Las kenningar", we find typical Borgesian contradictions, an ambiguity which leaves the reader, as so often happens, unsure of Borges' real attitude to his subject. He seems both to like the kennings and dislike them. He exposes examples of their "empleo disponible, incoherente" (368). He says: "Recorrer el índice total de las kenningar es exponerse a la incómoda sensación de que raras veces ha estado menos ocurrente el misterio – y más inadecuado y verboso" (378) and in his essay "La metáfora" he calls them "objetos verbales, puros e independientes

como un cristal o como un anillo de plata" (382). At the same time Borges perceives "the other side of the coin" when he says that "Reducir cada kenning a una palabra no es despejar incógnitas: es anular el poema" (370), in other words, whatever poetical or expressive value there was, it was to be found in the kenning itself. Its expressiveness lies in its capacity to reveal more than one aspect of the object presented. The kenning "peces de la batalla" means much more than sword, or as Borges puts it: "Los guerreros y la batalla se funden en un plano invisible, donde se agitan las espadas orgánicas y muerden y aborrecen" (379).¹⁴ Likewise, "los carbones encendidos del codo" elicits the analysis: "Esa identificación del oro y la llama -peligro y resplandor- no deja de ser eficaz" (376). The possibilities of the kennings to allude to more than one aspect of reality may recall the synesthetic power of the literary language of the northern hemisphere of Tlön: "Hay objetos compuestos de dos términos, uno de carácter visual y otro auditivo" (OC 1: 435). Visual appearance, sound, texture and motion may be inherent qualities of different kennings for the same phenomenon (a sea, thunder, shower, cloud of spears). To the modern mind, the kennings may seem to lack the suggestive power of, say, Zuhair's intuition of destiny being like a blind camel ("La busca de Averroes", OC 1: 586), but only because they do not strive to establish comparisons from which absolute conclusions can be drawn; they shun definition in favour of richness of flux. Nothing is *like* anything else, it *is* something else, before becoming something else still. This is the essential difference between the expansive mode of expression and the reductive mode, the kind of difference we see in "Undr" between Ulf's *skaldic* poetry and the Word. The kennings in *skaldic* poetry would dissolve into an infinite combination of disparate words that aspire to grasp everything, but in the end reveal nothing but their own limitations, that they are only words.

"La metáfora", which follows directly after "Las kenningar" in *Historia de la eternidad*, although Borges did not include it in the collection until 1952, repeats the condemnation of the kennings as metaphors. As he says, kennings are not a strictly Aristotelian metaphor in that they do not point out analogies between different things. Snorri's metaphors (i.e. his catalogue of metaphors) combine words but do not perceive analogies, they are purely verbal and arbitrary, whereas to Borges, the importance of a metaphor is not to be found in man's originality of in-

¹⁴ The "organic swords" find their counterparts in the "organic knives" of the story "El encuentro", *El informe de Brodie*, where the knives themselves, rather than their wielders do the fighting.

vention, but in his perceptiveness as a human being, his ability to put to words what people feel.¹⁵ Many kennings are not what we would call true metaphors in the Aristotelian terms cited by Borges. Those which bear no mythical connotations indicate that the poet is more of an inventor than a discoverer, his approach is figurative rather than comparative (To invert Averroes' words; "un famoso poeta es menos inventor que descubridor" [OC 1: 586]). The kennings that have a "profesión de asombro" (OC 1: 378), therefore, are as shortlived as the kind of poetry Averroes denounces: "...si el fin del poema fuera el asombro, su tiempo no se mediría por siglos, sino por días y por horas y tal vez por minutos" (OC 1: 586). The *skalds* display a similar arbitrariness in their metaphors to that of the Tlönistas in their metaphysics: "no buscan la verdad, ni siquiera la verosimilitud: buscan el asombro" (OC 1: 436). Yet at the same time Borges has shown that the mechanism of the *skaldic* verse could be an effective mode of expression for an ever-changing, unstable and perhaps grotesque reality.

Multiple meaning

In "Las kenningar" Borges quotes a stanza by Markús Skeggjason (d.1107), saying that the verses show us how "un barco parece agigantarse de cercanía" (OC 1: 376) :

El fiero jabalí de la inundación
Saltó sobre los techos de la ballena.
El oso del diluvio fatigó
El antiguo camino de los veleros.
El toro de las marejadas quebró
La cadena que amarra nuestro castillo.

The ship turns into three different animals during the voyage ("fiero jabalí", "oso", "toro"), three different heavy and strong animals (the base word) making their way across the sea (the definer, expressed with three different epithets). The three kennings coexist and coincide, all being representations of the same ship sailing across the sea. A closer reading indicates that the straightforward "reality" presented is made complex and intricate through the use of kennings: "the two base words construed with the verb give one meaning; the two full kennings taken with the same verb, another" (Frank 47). So we have "el jabalí saltó sobre los techos", "el oso fatigó el camino", "el toro quebró la cadena", and see how the definers ("de la inundación", "de la ballena" etc.) modify

¹⁵ In "La busca de Averroes", Borges' view is expressed through Averroes.

and metaphorize the base words. We can also experience a shift from the animate ("jabalí") to the inanimate ("jabalí de la inundación"), from land ("techo", "camino", "cadena") to sea ("techo de la ballena", "camino de los veleros", "cadena que amarra nuestro castillo").

Since the stanza above repeats the same "meaning" three times, the poet may seem to have fallen into the trap of tautology, yet there is always a difference, the ship moves across the sea until it reaches land. Like Ireneo Funes the *skalds* would seem to want to distinguish between "el perro de las tres y catorce (visto de perfil)" and "el perro de las tres y cuarto (visto de frente)" ("Funes el memorioso, OC 1: 490). The kennings are like Funes' all-encompassing memory and perception, an endless accumulation of signs which seem only to dwell on the surface of things. As mentioned above they are expansive and therefore form a contrast with Funes' system of numbers, which is reductive: "Su primer estímulo, creo, fue el desagrado de que los treinta y tres orientales requirieran dos signos y tres palabras, en lugar de una sola palabra y un solo signo" (OC 1: 489). We should also bear in mind that there are clear differences between Ireneo Funes and the *skalds* since Funes' language is denotative:

Funes reducía todo (hasta los números) a nombres... Un idioma de tal fuste, en el que cada número, situación o relación, son designados a través de un nombre, de poder operar, sería altamente denotativo: lleno de lo que Kripke llama "designadores rígidos". (Nuño 101)

The kennings and the way the *skalds* combine them and make them allude to a wide range of connotations point to a kind of mechanism that seems to be a search for the essential quality. The *skalds* seem to be trying to grasp the "thing" behind what changes with each perception, a kind of elusive Platonic *idea* that escapes all verbal reality. "The *skalds* confirm Wittgenstein's apprehension that speech is a kind of infinite Chinese box, with words spoken of only in other words". (Frank 29)

Kennings in Borges

We do not find among the kennings the kind of metaphors Borges approves of ("ensueño-vida, sueño-muerte, ríos y vidas que transcurren, etcétera" -OC 1: 384). Being of an iconographic nature the kennings often seem more related to Borges' symbols, such as coins, compasses, knives, masks and mirrors. In the case of both Borges and the *skalds* the combination of symbols is an expression of *Weltanschauung*. Direct quotation of kennings both in Anglo-Saxon and old Icelandic literature is common in Borges, who pays homage to the past by remembering

them. On the other hand the kenning itself conveys a world so complex and incomprehensible that it could almost be called Borgesian.

The *skalds* were poets of the genitive and combined words, which makes their verses so difficult to translate into less conjugated languages. This also applies to other languages that use combined words, like the English and German. In “Las kenningar” Borges quotes a line by Kipling and another by Yeats: “In the desert where the dung-fed camp-smoke curled” and “That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea” and calls them “inimitables e impensables en español” (OC 1: 378). In some of Borges’ stories and poems we find the old *skaldic* kennings, easily recognizable because of the genitive. They are usually fitted into a context which refers to the ancient Anglo-Saxons and Vikings and in that context they are expressions at once of nostalgia and respectful disassociation on the part of Borges. They appear directly quoted in stories such as “El Zahir”, and “Undr” and “El espejo y la máscara”. Borges also alludes to them in some of his poems, such as: “Un Sajón (449 A.D.)”, “Fragmento” and “A un poeta sajón” (*El otro, el mismo*). And in his poems “A Islandia” (*El oro de los tigres*) and “Islandia” (*Historia de la noche*) he seems to pay special homage to them through the insistent use of the genitive. Yet it is interesting to notice that we trace the relationship with the mechanism of the kennings more in the ambiguity of the narrative prose than in the poetry where the kennings really belong as metaphors.

In a complicated manner the *skald* could “juxtapose unlike kennings in a series of baroque metamorphoses, making a bison change into a bird that changed into a tree before becoming a lion” (Frank 46). The metamorphoses that occur in *skaldic* poetry may seem both strange and arbitrary, although perhaps they convey a vision neither more nor less strange and arbitrary than many in Borges’ stories. The Zahir undergoes constant metamorphoses: “En Guzerat, a fines del siglo XVIII, un tigre fue Zahir; en Java, un ciego de la mezquita de Surakarta, a quien lapidaron los fieles; en Persia, un astrolabio que Nadir Shah hizo arrojar al fondo del mar...” (OC 1: 589). Borges, the narrator, dreams he is money and writes a story where the first-person narrator is a serpent; the ship in Markús’ stanza is “jabalí” and “oso” and “toro”. A pantheistic and fantastical vision is conveyed through such juxtaposition, anything can be anything else until it dissolves into nothing.

Although it is Borges’ later stories that make direct allusions to the kennings, particularly those like “Undr” or “El espejo y la máscara”, the earlier stories too have references which directly or obliquely seem

to express the sort of vision we find among the *skalds*. The story of Sigurd which appears in the centre of "El Zahir" has been treated by, amongst others, Jaime Alazraki, who sees its inclusion in the story "como la relectura de Borges de esa vieja metáfora del tesoro que condena a su dueño" (*Prosa* 548). Other stories have been alluded to as having or possibly having an obscure relation to the kennings, particularly though "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", the opening story in *Ficciones*. As mentioned above, critics have pointed out a similarity between the *hrönir* and the kennings, both have been qualified by Borges as "objects" and phrases like "los *hrönir* de segundo y tercer grado -los *hrönir* derivados de otro *hrön*- exageran las aberraciones del inicial" do send the reader straight to the kennings and the underlying implication that words are but a poor imitation of an imitation, an "orgía platónica" to quote Juan Nuño. (40)

Other more directly linguistic aspects have also been pointed out. In the title, for instance, we have the name *Orbis Tertius* which seems to recall the Latin title of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, i.e. "*Orbis Terrrae*" -or "*Terrarum*" (27). Icelandic or quasi-Icelandic words have even been distinguished: "'Hlær" es la tercera persona singular, presente del verbo "reírse", que durante el medioevo también significaba alegrarse. "Jangr" no existe, pero la palabra concuerda con el sistema lingüístico medieval islandés" (Jónsdóttir 135).¹⁶ The word "*fang*" in the expression "*hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*" has also been defined as Icelandic, meaning "grasp" (Jónsdóttir 136).¹⁷ Borges' use of such words is probably meant to be deliberately misleading in the sense that they do not really have a meaning that sheds light on the ultimate significance of the story. Yet, in their lack of meaning they do mean. In a Borgesian fashion they indicate that, in a fantastical world, the resemblance of authenticity is as important as its substance, and is in fact its equivalent.

The languages spoken in both the northern and the southern hemisphere of Tlön, the expressions "*hacia arriba detrás duradero-fluir*" and "*aéreo-claro sobre oscuro-redondo*" or "*anaranjado-tenue-del cielo*" to indicate the moon, have been called "kenningar por excelencia" (Jónsdóttir 136), in spite of their lack of substantives. The habitants of Tlön and the *skalds* seem to coexist in a complex world of associations, where everything alluded to (philosophies, events, people, towers of blood, transparent tigers etc.) is forced into an enormous haphazard combination of

¹⁶ "Hlær" could also be an adjective which means "warm".

¹⁷ "Fang" also means "booty".

kennings until they become “a transparent metaphor for our world”. (Shaw 17)

In spite of the humorous tone in which the languages of Tlön and the *hrönnir* are presented there is an essentially serious tone in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” which would seem to stem from the idea of “dos voces neológicas, no autorizadas por el uso y ajenas a todo pensamiento severo: los verbos *encontrar* y *perder*” (OC 1: 437). In “Ulrica” we find a similar reflection: “Inglaterra fue nuestra y la perdimos, si alguien puede tener algo o algo puede perderse” (*El libro de arena*, OC 3: 17). For Borges, it is perhaps particularly the history of the North, the times of the Vikings and the *skalds* that reflect the ultimately saddening idealism of Tlön where what is forgotten disappears: “Para la historia universal, las guerras y los libros escandinavos son como si no hubieran sido; todo queda incomunicado y sin rastro; como si acontecieran en un sueño o en esas bolas de cristal que miran los videntes”. (LGM 99)

Word as monument

In a dialogue with Osvaldo Ferrari Borges explains how a poem can be seen as “un objeto más que se agrega al mundo: un objeto verbal” (*Diálogos* 78). He tells how he wanted to describe a tiger in the poem “El otro tigre” and realized “que ese tigre no es el tigre, sino simplemente un objeto verbal, una construcción, un edificio de palabras”. Such is perhaps the fate of all poetry and, strangely enough, the *skalds* seem to coincide with Borges’ view. Egill Skallagrímsson speaks of: “El túmulo de gloria que he levantado durará para siempre en el reino de la poesía” (LGM 106), Eyvindr Skáldaspillir says: “Quiero construir una alabanza / Estable y firme como un puente de piedra” (OC 1: 378) and Borges echoes their words: “He de labrar el verso incorruptible / Y (es mi deber) salvarme” (“El hacedor”, *La Cifra*, OC 3: 311). The “verbal architecture” of the earthy Icelanders and that of the sophisticated Argentinean are above all moving monuments to the attempt to grasp “El otro tigre, el que no está en el verso” (“El otro tigre”, *El Hacedor*, OC 2: 203). In spite of their failures they reflect and glorify “man’s attempt to overreach time by dint of creation” (Frank 21), an attempt that, although perhaps also doomed to failure, is neither despicable nor futile.

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