

Idealism in Two Stories from *The Book of Sand*

Several recent studies on Borges have explored the many philosophical motifs that he employs in his short stories.¹ This philosophical reading seems to be justified by a number of Borges' own statements about both his biography and his work. For example, in the Preface to *The Gold of the Tigers* (1972), he refers to his "philosophical preoccupation" which he says "has been with [him] since [his] childhood."² Not only does he frequently mention specific philosophers and philosophical doctrines, but he also exploits such doctrines in the actual content of the stories themselves, in this way making use of philosophical ideas in otherwise literary texts. Thus, while some, indeed perhaps most, readers see his stories merely as examples of a fiction of fantasy, others see them as thought experiments based on philosophical premises.

It is well known that one of Borges' favorite philosophical theories is that of idealism. That Borges is favorably disposed towards idealism in general is evidenced by the two articles combined under the title "New Refutation of Time" in *Other Inquisitions* (1952). These articles treat the philosophical issue of time by employing even more radical arguments for idealism than the standard refutations of materialism by Berkeley and Hume. Moreover, among the philosophers most frequently referred to by Borges are the idealists Plato, Berkeley and Schopenhauer.

In the present essay, I wish to explore the stories "The Mirror and the Mask" and "Undr" from Borges' late collection of short stories *The Book of Sand* (1975).³ I would like to argue that both stories represent an ar-

¹ Cf. Nuño, Champeau, Arana, Kaminsky.

² *The Gold of the Tigers*, translated by Alastair Reid, also appears in the Penguin edition of *The Book of Sand*, referenced below.

³ These stories appear in the English translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni. All English quotations and references are to this edition, (in the text as "BS"). References are also given to the standard Spanish edition of Borges' *Obras Completas*.

gument for idealism. These stories juxtapose idealism and materialism in such a way that ultimately speaks in favor of idealism over one's common sense materialist views. The main characteristic of ideas in the philosophical sense is their universality. By contrast, the characteristic sign of materialism is particularity since each material entity is an empirical particular which occupies a particular place in space and time. This contrast between universality and particularity is what we see in the positions juxtaposed in the two stories. I will first argue, before beginning my analysis, that "The Mirror and the Mask" and "Undr" are intended to be taken together since their goal is to make the same philosophical point. In my first section I will try to indicate briefly the reasons for discussing these two stories together as a single unit. In sections two and three I will treat the content of the two stories individually. Finally, in my fourth section, I will explore various arguments in favor of my primary thesis that the two stories present, so to speak, a literary argument for idealism.

1.

The claim that "The Mirror and the Mask" and "Undr" are related to one another and are intended to be read as a single unit is supported by a number of things. First, when Borges comments on *The Book of Sand* as a whole in his "Afterword," instead of describing each of these stories individually, he speaks of them together in contrast to a previous work: "An earlier story of mine, 'The Library of Babel' (1941), imagines an infinite number of books; 'Undr' and 'The Mirror and the Mask,' [imagine] centuries-old literatures that are made up of a single line or word" (BS 93; OC 3: 72). Here Borges indicates that the two stories have a single theme; namely, they both portray a literature of singularity, i.e. one that consists in "a single line or word." In "The Mirror and the Mask" the poetic literature of the Irish is reduced to a single line by the court poet, Ollan. In "Undr" it is the fictional Nordic people, the Urns, whose entire poetry consists in one seemingly mystical word. These two stories together are thus meant to be the antipode of the world presented in "The Library of Babel." The stories represent a contrast between singularity and plurality: the infinite plurality of books in "The Library of Babel" and the singularity of the poetry presented in "The Mirror and the Mask" and "Undr." This is one of the essential contrasts between, on the one hand, empiricism or its extreme position nominalism, which are concerned with a manifold of empirical particulars, and, on the other hand, idealism, which finds the truth not in any

given particular but in an abstract idea or thought such as justice or the Good.

Second, there are a number of internal indices in the stories of "Undr" and "The Mirror and the Mask," themselves, which indicate a parallelism. Perhaps the most obvious is the repetition of two phrases. In "The Mirror and the Mask" the Irish King describes the first poem which his bard Ollan writes as excellent by the usual standards of traditional poetry. The poet employs the standard metaphors and formulations of epic poetry: "War is the beautiful web of men, and blood is the sword's water." (BS 54)⁴ These two formulations are repeated virtually verbatim in "Undr" where Bjarni Thorkelsson says to his fellow bard Ulf Sigurdsson, "In your ode you called blood the sword's water and a battle the web of men." (BS 61)⁵ The similarity is striking. That a repetition of this kind could be accidental in such carefully crafted stories is unthinkable. This formulation is intended to describe traditional poetry which in both stories gives way to the more mystical conception of poetry composed of a single line or word.

Moreover, this almost identical characterization occurs in remarkably similar situations in the two stories. In "The Mirror and the Mask" the court poet Ollan is charged with composing a poem in celebration of the Irish King's victory over the Norwegians at the Battle of Clontarf. In "Undr" the foreign bard Ulf Sigurdsson, in order to escape the persecution of the King of the Urns, composes of his own initiative "a *drápa*, or ode, that celebrate[s] the victories, the fame, and the mercy of the king" (BS 60)⁶ Sigurdsson's ode, like the initial poem of Ollan, observes the standard rules of traditional poetry. Its author describes it thus: "There was no lack of the rhetorical figures, the alliterations, and the stresses that the form demands." (BS 60)⁷ The Irish King's description of Ollan's first poem in "The Mirror and the Mask" is quite similar, albeit more specific: "You have skillfully handled rhyme, alliteration, assonance, quantities, the artifices of learned rhetoric, the wise

⁴ "La guerra es el hermoso tejido de hombres y el agua de la espada es la sangre" (OC 3: 46).

⁵ "En tu ditirambo apodaste agua de la espada a la sangre y tejido de hombres a la batalla" (OC 3: 50).

⁶ "una *drápa*, o composición laudatoria, que celebraba las victorias, la fama y la misericordia del rey" (OC 3: 49).

⁷ "No faltaban las figuras retóricas, las aliteraciones y los acentos que el género requiere" (OC 3: 49).

variation of metres" (*BS* 54).⁸ Thus the description of the respective initial situations and the respective initial poems in the two stories is quite similar. Borges invites a comparison between the two stories by giving them a similar point of departure.

Finally, the important motif of the dagger appears in the two stories. The dagger, which represents death, is the gift from the Irish King to Ollan for his third and final poem. Although it is not stated explicitly, the suggestion is that the dagger is the instrument of Ollan's suicide. It also represents the downfall of the victorious and powerful Irish King himself, who, after hearing the one-line poem, is reduced to "a beggar wandering the length and breadth of Ireland" (*BS* 57).⁹ Similarly, in the story "Undr" Ulf Sigurdsson, after singing his ode, sees a dagger under the pillow of the dying King Gunnlaug of the Urns (*BS* 60; *OC* 3: 49). This foreshadows the King's death, about which Sigurdsson learns upon his return to the land of the Urns years later when he is told "the king is no longer called Gunnlaug....His name is now another" (*BS* 63).¹⁰ Here Borges once again seems to invite a comparison between the two stories, this time not at their beginning but rather at their conclusion. As I will examine in more detail below, death is the result of revelation in both stories, and the symbol for death is the dagger.

Thus there is ample evidence that these two stories are in some way connected. In what follows I wish to argue that there is a single philosophical point which unites them. Given this, it is hardly surprising that Borges portrays this philosophical point by means of the similar formulations, motifs and symbols noted here. It is conceivable that he originally wanted to write a story which was the mirror image of "The Library of Babel." The stories "The Mirror and the Mask" and "Undr" perhaps began as drafts of the same story which was intended to serve this purpose; they then later developed into independent stories in their own right. This common beginning would then explain their similarity in both theme and content.

⁸ "Has manejado con destreza la rima, la aliteración, la asonancia, las cantidades, los artificios de la docta retórica, la sabia alteración de los metros" (*OC* 3: 46).

⁹ "un mendigo que recorre los caminos de Irlanda" (*OC* 3: 47).

¹⁰ "—Ya no se llama Gunnlaug. Ahora es otro su nombre" (*OC* 3: 51).

2.

As has been indicated, according to Borges' own account, the general theme of both stories is the idea of an entire literature which consists of only a single word or line. In the first story, "The Mirror and the Mask," there is a gradual three-step development beginning with traditional poetry and progressing to an enigmatic conception of a poem that consists of a single line. With this gradual development, which is typical for Borges, he by degrees weans us of our common sense conception of poetry. This development represents the clearest juxtaposition of the idealist and the materialist views. In this section I will trace this development and analyze its significance.

The bard Ollan, having been requested by the King of Ireland to produce a poem which sings the praises of the King's victory, at first produces a standard epic, which rigorously follows all of the accepted rules of the genre. In accepting the King's request, Ollan recounts his many skills and vast knowledge which qualify him to undertake the task. This knowledge refers to the already established body of truth which he has mastered but not modified or expanded. In his praise of the work, the King says, "If all the literature of Ireland were to perish—*absit omen*—it could be reconstructed without loss from your classic ode" (BS 54).¹¹ This first poem represents the stage of common sense Ollan has mastered a plurality of particular skills in order to produce his poem. Moreover, the poem accurately mirrors the plurality of individual events that took place. The world is thought to be constituted by precisely this plurality of individual things and events. But yet despite this first masterful work of poetry, there is still a sense of inadequacy. Even though the poet has perfectly executed his charge, there is still something missing. The King says, "All is well and yet nothing has happened" (BS 54).¹² He implies that the poet has still not begun to describe the actual events of the battle he is supposed to be exalting, but the implication is that there is something inadequate about traditional poetry as such and likewise about our common sense conception of the world as consisting of particular material entities. Thus, the King requests that the poet take another year and continue his work.

¹¹ "Si se perdiera toda la literatura de Irlanda *-omen absit-* podría reconstruirse sin pérdida con tu clásica oda" (OC 3: 46).

¹² "— Todo está bien y sin embargo nada ha pasado" (OC 3: 46).

The second poem marks a progression or, if one prefers, a regression with respect to the first. Unlike the first poem, its content is confused and even incoherent: "The ode was strange....In its warlike chaos there struggled with one another the God that is Three and is One, Ireland's pagan deities, and those who would wage war hundreds of years later at the beginning of the Elder Edda"(BS 55).¹³ Moreover, the poem is not characterized by the perfection of the standard rules and forms of epic poetry or grammar: "The form was no less odd. A singular noun governed a plural verb. The prepositions were alien to common usage. Harshness alternated with sweetness. the metaphors were arbitrary, or so they seemed"(BS 55).¹⁴ What is surprising is that the King does not disdain the work or reject it as unworthy in comparison to the masterful first poem but rather declares it to be a striking improvement over the bard's first effort: "Your first ode I could declare was an apt compendium of all that has been sung in Ireland... This one outdoes, and even makes as nothing, whatever came before it. It astounds, it dazzles, it causes wonderment"(BS 55).¹⁵ The key here is the final word "wonderment." This is perhaps the main motif of both stories. The title "Undr" is an old Norse word meaning "wonder." It is also "the Word" which is simultaneously the entire literature of the Urns, the people in the story "Undr." The improvement in Ollan's work consists in the fact that while the first poem was a mere description of individual events, the second poem causes wonder. Its incoherence better captures reality than the lucid description of the first poem. This incoherence is merely suggestive and enjoins the listener to conceive of the events in his or her own mind. Thus the events become ideas and not merely empirical descriptions. Yet this poem is still inadequate; it has not yet reached the full height of idealism. Once again the poet is asked to return after a year's time with a new poem.

¹³ "La página era extraña. (...) En su desorden bélico se agitaban el Dios que es Tres y es Uno, los números paganos de Irlanda y los que guerrearían, centenares de años después, en el principio de la Edda Mayor" (OC 3: 46).

¹⁴ "La forma no era menos curiosa. Un sustantivo singular podía regir un verbo plural. Las preposiciones eran ajenas a las normas comunes, La aspereza alternaba con la dulzura. Las metáforas eran arbitrarias o así lo parecían" (OC 3: 46).

¹⁵ "—De tu primera loa pude afirmar que era un feliz resumen de cuanto se ha cantado en Irlanda. Ésta supera todo lo anterior y también lo aniquila. Suspende, maravilla y deslumbra" (OC 3: 46).

Finally when the bard returns to the court after the third year with his third poem, the reader is told that “It consisted of a single line” (BS 56)¹⁶ This final one-line poem is characterized by its enigmatic nature. It cannot be uttered aloud but rather must be whispered into the King’s ear. Moreover, it causes the destruction of the bard and the downfall of the King. It too is associated with wonders. The King’s reaction to the poem is as follows:

In my youth...I sailed towards the sunset. On the one island I saw silver hounds that dealt death to golden boars. On another we fed ourselves on the fragrance of magic apples. On a third I saw walls of fire. On the farthest island of all an arched and hanging river cut across the sky and in its waters went fishes and boats. These are *wonders*, but they do not compare with your poem, which in some way encompasses them all. (BS 56. My italics)¹⁷

The poem is praised as far superior to the other ones that the bard had produced, and it is claimed that it far exceeds the wonder produced by the previous poem and, in addition, all of the other wonders to which the King has been witness in his life. The poem is said not merely to exceed, but in some way to encompass these wonders. Here there is a clear analogue to idealism where the abstract idea is thought to encompass the finite representations or appearances and to be their truth. The third poem reaches the height of singularity with its one line. It is thus at the furthest distance from the manifold descriptions of people, places and events of the first poem. The one line is thought to be richer than all empirical description.

As is clear from this analysis, in “The Mirror and the Mask” there is a progression from, on the one hand, traditional poetry, by which I understand poetry that describes individual events in accordance with certain fixed standards and rules to, on the other hand, an enigmatic single line of poetry which follows no rules at all, indeed, which is not even comprehensible at first. In this series of poems there is a progression from the plurality and the concrete to the singular and the abstract, i.e. from the material to the ideal. Somewhat surprisingly, the

¹⁶ “Era una sola línea” (OC 3: 47).

¹⁷ “ – En los años de mi juventud –dijo el Rey– navegué hacia el ocaso. En una isla vi lebreles de plata que daban muerte a jabalíes de oro. En otra nos alimentamos con la fragancia de las manzanas mágicas. En otra vi murallas de fuego. En la más lejana de todas un río abovedado y pendiente surcaba el cielo y por sus aguas iban peces y barcos. Éstas son maravillas, pero no se comparan con tu poema, que de algún modo las encierra” (OC 3: 47).

moral to the story seems to be that the poems become better and better and that the final poem, which is most enigmatic, represents the truth. In other words, the truth lies in the singular abstract idea evoked by the single line and not in the manifold of empirical descriptions.

The Irish King gives to Ollan a different symbolic gift as a reward for each of the poems. The King's reward for the first poem is a silver mirror which is symbolic for the nature of the poem itself. The first poem is neither new nor original, but rather it is a mirror of the past works of literature which have been considered the masterpieces of their respective languages. Indeed, works are judged masterpieces by the way in which they manage to imitate their predecessors, yet with specific creative modifications; thus, there is a conscious attempt on the part of Vergil to imitate Homer, and on the part of Dante to imitate them both, and on the part of Milton to imitate all three of his predecessors. They all represent something transparent and unitary since they are all working within the accepted rules for the genre of epic. In his request to Ollan, the King compares himself with Aeneas and Ollan with Vergil, thus implying that Ollan's goal is to imitate the Roman poet and to follow the time-honored practices of poetry. With the first poem Ollan has simply repeated the work of his predecessors. The King says, "You have given each word its true meaning, and each substantive the epithet given to it by the poets of old. In your whole panegyric there is not a single image unknown to the classics" (*BS* 54)¹⁸ Moreover, the poem is a mirror of the plurality of empirical reality. It offers detailed descriptions of the individual events, and characters are given epithets and individual personalities. It is thus a poem of plurality. There is nothing hidden or mysterious or enigmatic here. The King's reward for the second poem is also symbolic; for it he rewards Ollan with a golden mask. The second poem is no longer a transparent mirroring of the events but rather is somewhat more enigmatic. The events are confused and hidden behind ungrammatical usages in the way that a mask hides the face that is behind it. These events are merely suggested, and the poem leaves it to the reader to fill out the picture with his or her own ideas. The gift for the third and final poem is the aforementioned dagger, symbolic of death which accompanies revelation. It foreshadows the death of Ollan and the downfall of the King.

¹⁸ "Has atribuido a cada vocablo su genuina acepción y a cada nombre sustantivo el epíteto que le dieron los primeros poetas. No hay en toda la loa una sola imagen que no hayan usado los clásicos" (*OC* 3: 46).

There is a further progression in the status of the reception of the three poems. The first one, which is a brilliant standard work, an imitation of its predecessors, the King orders to be copied twelve times each by thirty scribes. It is thus conceived as a more or less popular work, and for this reason many copies are needed. It is straightforward and accessible to all and is thought to stand as one of the national poems of Ireland. The second poem, by contrast, is reserved only for the educated and thus is given a special place. The King says of the poem: "The ignorant will be unworthy of it, but not so the learned, the few. An ivory casket will be the resting place of its single copy" (BS 55)¹⁹ Since this second poem is to be read only by the few educated men of Ireland, a single copy suffices. This poem is more esoteric since it contains inchoate material which is inaccessible to the masses. The third poem is even more esoteric yet and has only the King himself as its audience. It must be whispered in his ear, and no written copy of it even exists.

The progression of the poems in this story represents a movement from plurality to singularity, from common sense materialism to idealism. By portraying this progression, Borges is able to juxtapose the original position of common sense materialism with the idealism of the poem of one line. Before his commission, Ollan gives a long speech in which he recounts one by one his various skills and abilities. In this description he recounts the plurality of human knowing in the different fields. This plurality contrasts with the singularity of the one-line poem which is his ultimate creation. Thus he begins with the plurality of the empirical and moves to the singular idea. The teleology of this progression, which ends with the one-line poem and its revelation represents an affirmation of idealism. The single line contains a truth which is only for the few and which is higher than the empirical truths of individual things, truths which are accessible to all. Thus the movement and the teleology of the progression represent an implicit argument for idealism.

3.

"Undr," which is the next story in *The Book of Sand*, portrays the same development in the life of an individual bard and implies that it has in fact already taken place at some point in the past for the Urns, a Scandinavian people. This development presents a further parallelism be-

¹⁹ "No la merecerán los ignaros, pero sí los doctos, los menos. Un cofre de marfil será la custodia del único ejemplar" (OC 3: 46).

tween "The Mirror and the Mask" and "Undr." In both cases the movement is from traditional poetry and pluralism to a poetry of singularity. In this section I will trace the development first in the people, the Urns, and then in the life of the poet Ulf Sigurdsson. I will argue that these progressions, like that in "The Mirror and the Mask" examined above, represent an implicit argument for idealism.

We are told that the poetry of the Urns "consists of a single word" (*BS* 59),²⁰ and it is this fact that evokes the curiosity of Ulf Sigurdsson and causes him to travel in search of them. Thus the Urns have already progressed or regressed to the point where they have wholly given up traditional literature and where their literature consists of a single enigmatic word. But there is a reference to an earlier period when they had a literature which was more manifold. After having heard Sigurdsson's ode, the bard Bjarni Thorkelsson tells him that the images Sigurdsson used in his poem are familiar to him: "I remember having heard those figures from my father's father" (*BS* 61).²¹ Thus in the generation of Thorkelsson's grandfather there existed what we understand as traditional poetry, but in the interim it has given way to the poetry of the word. Thorkelsson explains, "Nowadays, we do not define each thing that our song quickens; we express it in a single word, which is the Word" (*BS* 61).²² The plurality of empirical descriptions of traditional poetry has been eliminated and replaced by the singularity of the idea.

This movement, which has taken place in the poetry of the Urns in general, is mirrored in the life of Sigurdsson himself. At the first stage he comes to the court and naively sings his song, which is a fine example of traditional poetry, not knowing that this is inferior to the one-word poetry to the Urns. Sigurdsson is an outsider, and thus he comes to the Urns, who live in a remote and isolated place in Scandinavia, with the traditional conceptions of poetry from the outside world. The King of the Urns is indulgent towards him, but Sigurdsson is nonetheless ignorant of the fact that his performance at the court is regarded as having no poetic value. The contrast comes immediately when his place is taken by the court bard, who sings in vain the one word to the dying King. Once Sigurdsson hears this poem his life is changed forever, and he is no longer able to think of traditional poetry in the same

²⁰ "la poesía de los urnos consta de una sola palabra" (*OC* 3: 49).

²¹ "Recuerdo haber oído esas figuras al padre de mi padre" (*OC* 3: 50).

²² "Ahora no definimos cada hecho que enciende nuestro canto; lo ciframos en una sola palabra que es la Palabra" (*OC* 3: 50).

way. Thus there is a clear sense of the inadequacy of traditional poetry at this initial stage.

At the second stage Sigurdsson struggles with this traditional notion of poetry as a result of having heard the one-word poem. He explains how, after having left the land of the Urns, he is tormented throughout the years by doubt:

In the course of time I have been many men; it was a whirlwind, a long dream, but all the while the main thing was the Word. From time to time I disbelieved in it. I kept telling myself that to renounce the beautiful game of combining beautiful words was senseless, and that there was no reason to search for a single, and perhaps imaginary, word. (BS 62)²³

This torment is the result of having heard the Word and seeing the emptiness of the lucidity and transparency of traditional poetry. He had lived his life theretofore as a bard and made his living by “the beautiful game of combining beautiful words.” Now this sense of beauty that appears hollow and meaningless to him.

Finally, the third stage is marked by Sigurdsson’s revelation, which answers his years of doubt by finally making clear to him the meaning of the Word: “One early dawn, along the banks of a river that widened into a sea, I believed I had come upon the revelation” (BS 62).²⁴ For the moment nothing more is said about the revelation, but it causes Sigurdsson to return to the land of the Urns and to seek out his fellow bard and former protector Thorkelsson. The now aged Thorkelsson makes a point of asking him whether or not he continues to sing his poems. To this Sigurdsson responds, “At first, I sang to earn my living....Later, overcome by a fear I do not understand, I was estranged from my harp and my song” (BS 63).²⁵ The poet thus comes to give up writing traditional poetry when the meaning of the Word is revealed to him. At the end of the story, Thorkelsson at the point of death sings the single word “*undr*,” and Sigurdsson’s response shows that he too, as a result of the revelation, has reached this final stage of poetry: “I took

²³ “En el curso del tiempo he sido muchos, pero ese torbellino fue un largo sueño. Lo esencial era la Palabra. Alguna vez descreí de ella. Me repetí que renunciar al hermoso juego de combinar palabras hermosas era insensato y que no hay por qué indagar una sola, acaso ilusoria” (OC 3: 50-51).

²⁴ “Cierta aurora a orillas de un río que se dilataba en un mar creí haber dado con la revelación” (OC 3: 51).

²⁵ “— Al principio -le dije- canté para ganarme la vida. Luego, un temor que no comprendo me alejó del canto y del arpa” (OC 3: 51).

up the harp and sang to a different word" (*BS* 63).²⁶ Thus Sigurdsson arrives at the poetry of the single word at the end of the story and presumably at the end of his own life.

From this analysis it is clear that there is a parallelism between the series of poems presented by Ollan to the Irish King in "The Mirror and the Mask" and the development in the life of the poet Sigurdsson in "Undr". In each case the story begins with a traditional conception of poetry, according to which individual things are described and portrayed lucidly in accordance with the rules of the craft. At the end of both stories there is a revelation caused by a poem which consists in one case of a single line and in the other in a single word. This revelation causes the death of those who experience it. In both cases the movement is from plurality to singularity, from empirical particulars to the Idea, and from ignorance to enlightenment.

4.

Apart from the series of progressions traced in the two previous sections, there are other scattered bits of information that provide additional evidence for the argument for idealism in these stories. In this section I will explore some of these other bits of evidence. Specifically, I wish to point out individual aspects of traditional theories of idealism such as those of Plato and Hegel, and indicate how these elements can be found in the stories explored here. The picture of these stories that emerges is a metaphysical theory of idealism with religious and ethical implications.

In the history of philosophy, idealism has often been at odds with empiricism since in order to be an idealist, one must at some level deny the reality and truth of the empirical world and perception. The world of experience is thought to be transitory and illusory, whereas the world of thought remains stable and is thus considered to be true. This feature of idealism is present in these stories. In "The Mirror and the Mask," for example, Ollan, upon receiving the idea of the one-line poem, is rendered insensible to the world of perception. When he comes to the court with his third and final poem, he is described as follows: "Something other than time had furrowed and transformed his features. His eyes seemed to stare into the distance or to be blind" (*BS*

²⁶ "Tomé el arpa y canté con una palabra distinta" (*OC* 3: 51).

56)²⁷ Knowledge of the idea causes the poet to become blind to the world of empirical particulars. The plurality of his previous knowledge becomes meaningless. Similarly in "Undr" when Sigurdsson returns to the land of the Urns to find Thorkelsson again, he finds him changed: "From the floor, Thorkelsson told me to light a candle in the bronze candlestick. His face had aged so much that I could not help thinking that I, too, was old" (*BS* 62).²⁸ From this description one can glean that when Sigurdsson entered, Thorkelsson was sitting or lying on the floor in the dark. He no longer had any need for light which is necessary for visual perception. He has become indifferent to the world of perception and sense and is focused purely on the Word. Due to his knowledge of the Word, he has attained inner enlightenment.

There are also light and darkness images which recall Plato's theory of perception and specifically the allegory of the cave. In "Undr" almost all of the action takes place in obscurity. Sigurdsson begins to recount the story over the dying campfire when "the cold and the dawn entered through the uneven chinks in the wall" (*BS* 59).²⁹ When Sigurdsson arrives at the land of the Urns, "it was night" (*BS* 59)³⁰ and when the King's men come in search of him, "There were still stars in the sky." (*BS* 60)³¹ After the audience with the King and having heard the song of the bard of the Urns, Sigurdsson leaves with the others and says, "In astonishment I saw that the light was waning on another day" (*BS* 61).³² In the scene referred to above, when he returns and finds Thorkelsson, night has already fallen, and he must light a candle in order to see his old acquaintance (*BS* 62; *OC* 3: 51). The darkness is a metaphor for the inexact perception of the senses. To rely on perception and on the senses is to live in an illusion, unaware of the lasting truth of the Idea. Only in the moment of revelation in which one perceives the eternal forms is there light. Only then does one see the objects themselves and not merely their shadows as with the prisoners in

²⁷ "Algo, que no era el tiempo, había transformado sus rasgos. Los ojos parecían mirar muy lejos o haber quedado ciegos" (*OC* 3: 47).

²⁸ "Thorkelsson, desde el suelo, me dijo que encendiera un velón en el candelero de bronce. Tanto había envejecido su cara que no pude dejar de pensar que yo mismo era viejo" (*OC* 3: 51).

²⁹ "por las desaparejas hendijas de la pared fueron entrando el frío y el alba" (*OC* 3: 48).

³⁰ "Era de noche" (*OC* 3: 49).

³¹ "Aún había estrellas en el alba" (*OC* 3: 49).

³² "Vi con asombro que la luz estaba declinando" (*OC* 3: 50).

Plato's cave. The revelation occurs to both Ollan (*BS* 56; *OC* 3: 47) and to Sigurdsson at dawn (*BS* 62; *OC* 3: 51).

Notions of innate ideas or *apriori* knowledge have traditionally been associated with theories of idealism. Such notions stand as a counterposition to transitory empirical knowledge. This aspect of idealism comes up when Sigurdsson asks Thorkelsson to tell him the Word which the poet of the Urns sang but which he was unable to hear. Thorkelsson responds, "I have sworn not to divulge it. Besides, nobody can teach anything. You must find it out for yourself" (*BS* 61).³³ This response recalls the Platonic doctrine of innate knowledge and the Socratic notion of the teacher as a midwife who brings out the knowledge which is already present in the individual. This is perhaps best illustrated in the *Meno* where it is shown that the slave boy, unbeknownst to himself, has knowledge of geometry without ever having studied the subject, indeed without any formal education at all. Merely by asking him questions, Socrates brings that innate knowledge to the surface. So also in "Undr," no one can teach Sigurdsson knowledge of the Word; he must discover the meaning of the word "wonder" in the wonders of his own life. But the individual experiences of wonder are not the Word or the truth, but rather they serve only to bring that truth, which was always in Sigurdsson, to consciousness.

The idea of wonder in the two stories examined here corresponds to what, for Plato, is called the Idea of the Idea or for Hegel the Absolute Idea. The notion is of one all-encompassing Idea. In "The Mirror and the Mask," the Irish King recounts the many wonders of his life and concludes, "These are wonders, but they do not compare with your poem, which in some way encompasses them all" (*BS* 56. Quoted above). This poem is the idea which contains all other ideas, as in classical idealism. Likewise, the three posts which Sigurdsson passes—with the fish, the disk, and the design that he cannot remember—are all called "the Word." They are all included in the Idea—a sensible entity of nature, an ideal geometrical form, and a complex design. Another argument can be found in the fact that "the Word" of the Urns is written in the upper case. This convention is used when referring to abstract ideas such as "Justice" or "the Good". In Plato, for example, it is common practice to refer to "the Idea" in the upper case. By writing something in upper case in this way, one indicates that it is a singular

³³ "—He jurado no revelarla. Además, nadie puede enseñar nada. Debes buscarla solo" (*OC* 3: 50).

item, in the way the first letters of proper names, which denote specific individuals, "John" or "Jack," are written in the upper case. It is *the* Idea and not just any idea. But unlike specific empirical individuals, the Idea is a specific abstract universal. The capitalization also thus indicates something abstract in the way in which "the Good" is the abstract noun formed from the adjective "good." What is at issue is not any particular thing which is good, but the Good itself.

The Word is the totality of one's life experiences and recollections: all of the impressions, feelings and sentiments one has had, all of the people one has met, all of the places one has been, etc. The Word is all of these individual things, not taken individually but rather as an organic totality, i.e. as a kind of beatific vision. This vision is associated, understandably enough, with wonder. Thus there is a parallel drawn between life and poetry. Upon hearing the word sung by the court bard of the Urns, Sigurdsson says, "I would have liked his song to go on forever and to be my life" (*BS* 61).³⁴ The point is that each individual must discover the Word for his or her own life. Therefore it cannot be communicated since each individual has his or her own experiences, which only in part overlap with that of others. Thus one person cannot reveal to another the Word for his life since one cannot know the totality of the other person's experience. The Word must thus be discovered and enunciated by each individual on the basis of his or her unique set of individual experiences.

Since the single word "*undr*" or "wonder" captures the wonder of one's own life, it can only be understood at the point of death when one looks back on all of the marvels and adventures that constitute the entirety of one's life. Sigurdsson recognizes his life in the one-word poem of the dying Thorkelsson: "The dying man's song held me rapt, but in it and in his chords I recognized my own verses, the slave woman who gave me my first love, the men I had killed, the chill of dawn, daybreak over the water, the oars" (*BS* 63).³⁵ There is a sense of a beatific vision or absolute knowing which looks back over one's life and surveys the whole from a theretofore unknown absolute perspective. Revelation only comes about at the point of death. This is the

³⁴ "Yo hubiera querido que el canto siguiera para siempre y que fuera mi vida" (*OC* 3: 50).

³⁵ "Me sentí arrebatado por el canto del hombre que moría, pero en su canto y en su acorde vi mis propios trabajos, la esclava que me dio el primer amor, los hombres que maté, las albas de frío, la aurora sobre el agua, los remos" (*OC* 3: 51).

point of the image of the dagger in both stories. In “The Mirror and the Mask” the Irish King is reduced to a beggar upon hearing the one-line poem, and his court bard Ollan dies as a result of the revelation. In “Undr” Thorkelsson tells Sigurdsson, “you will not be long in meeting your death, because you have heard the Word” (BS 61).³⁶ At the end of the story he dies after singing the Word. This ending recalls the final pages of García Márquez’s *Hundred Years of Solitude* when Aureliano Babilonia deciphers the mysterious pergaments of Melquiades. The pergaments tell the story of the hundred-year history of his family, the Buendías, and the moment when he deciphers them, he, the last member of the line, must meet his death. To him alone is granted the totality or the overview of all experience. Death is simultaneous with revelation.

The upshot of “The Mirror and the Mask” and “Undr,” according to this reading, seems to be that the unitary truth of the Idea is, generally speaking, not for humans to know, but rather belongs to God and to the eternal. Thus it is a mortal sin even to glimpse it (BS 56; OC 3: 47). Being caught in the mutable world of empirical particulars, man cannot obtain knowledge of the eternal Idea; his life is spent in darkness of this truth. But yet, at the point of death man can grasp it as a revelation. Somewhat surprisingly, this Idea is not some objective fact about the external world or some secret of the universe itself, but rather it is the truth of one’s own life. It is a private and subjective truth, which can neither be learned nor communicated. With these stories Borges reminds us of the essentially private experience of wonder, which becomes so easily forgotten in the banalities of daily life. He affirms the truth and reality of this experience over the plurality of such mundane distractions.

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³⁶ “no tardarás en morir porque has oído la Palabra” (OC 3: 50).