The Boreal Borges

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The Boreal Borges

Jonathan C. Williams

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT
The Boreal Borges

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Jorge Luis Borges’s story “El Zahir” describes a moment where the protagonist finds rest from his monomania by reworking one of the central texts in Old Germanic myth, the story of Sigurd and Brynhild. The approach taken here by the protagonist is the paradigm used in this thesis for understanding Borges’s own strong readings of Old Germanic literature, specifically Old Scandinavian texts.

In chapter one, a brief outline of the myth of Sigurd and Brynhild, with a particular emphasis on Gram, the sword that lay between them, is provided and juxtaposed with Borges’s own family history, focusing on the family’s storied military past. This image of the sword as the symbol for the north and its relation to Borges’s family and political interests is sustained throughout the thesis. Chapter two is a survey of the various facets of Borges’s literary output that were influenced by Nordic myth and literary styles: first, literary criticism, second, poetry and prose, and third, translation. The survey shows that Borges’s engagement with the north began early and was maintained throughout his life. Likewise, after working through seven works from disparate periods it becomes clear that Borges is not merely introducing the Spanish speaking world to Old Scandinavian texts, but, in the same fashion as the protagonist in “El Zahir,” subsuming them in a way that is uniquely Borgesian. The third chapter follows the same approach as the survey but focuses on Borges’s short stories, specifically two short stories from his collection entitled Libro de Arena: “Ulrica” and “Undr.” Many of the conclusions that emerged in the survey are further validated in the analysis of these two stories, but with greater emphasis on how they relate to Borges’s later years, and the themes that begin to surround his preparation for death.

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings of the previous three chapters by way of a close reading of Borges’s tombstone. Each aspect of the stone is connected to Old Germanic myth and how that symbolized the eventual consummation of his joy: the sword that kept him separated from love was eventually lifted, as it was for Ulrica and Javier in “Ulrica.”

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges, Old Norse, Völsunga Saga, borgesian, Literatura Germanica Medieval, influence, strong reading
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.................................................................................................................................II
Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................III
Table of Contents...............................................................................................................IV
Chapter 1: Introduction........................................................................................................1
Chapter 2: Survey..................................................................................................................20
Chapter 3: “Undr” and “Ulrica” .........................................................................................66
Chapter 4: Conclusion.........................................................................................................86
Works Cited.........................................................................................................................92
Appendix.............................................................................................................................95
Chapter 1

“hann tekr Íverdit gram ok leggr i meðal þeirra bért” (Völsunga 174)

“he takes the sword Gram and lays it unsheathed between them.” (Völsunga 175)

Introduction

What are the connections between Old Norse Literature and the works of Jorge Luis Borges? Was there a relationship of influence? Are the similarities between the two enough to justify a full-length inquiry? In his 1953 essay entitled “La literatura alemana en la época de Bach” (“German Literature in the Age of Bach”) Borges wrote:

En el ilustre ensayo de De Quincey sobre el asesinato considerado como una de las bellas artes, hay una referencia a un libro sobre Islandia. Ese libro, escrito por un viajero holandés, tiene un capítulo que se ha hecho famoso en la literatura inglesa, y al que alude Chesterton alguna vez. Es un capítulo titulado “Sobre las serpientes de Islandia”; es muy breve, suficiente y lacónico: consta de esta única frase: “Serpientes en Islandia, no hay.” (312)

In De Quincey’s famous essay on murder considered as one of the fine arts, there is a reference to a book about Iceland. That book, written by a Dutch traveler, has a chapter which has become famous in English literature and was mentioned by Chesterton. It is a chapter entitled ‘On
the Snakes in Iceland,’ and it is brief and to the point, as it consists of a single sentence: ‘Snakes in Iceland; there aren’t any.’ (Selected Non-Fiction 427)

In a review of the Complete Sagas of the Icelanders Joe Allard writes of the saga style:

Genealogy and poetry aside, the saga narrative style is straightforward. New readers are usually struck by a prose that is laconic, terse and succinct. Events dominate the narrative, and characters, once introduced, are shown in significant action. The sagas are often concerned with disputes and feuds, so there are many bloody episodes. (161)

In Borges’s obituary Edward A. Gargan characterized Borges’s style in the following way:

Many of the basic literary elements that came to characterize Mr. Borges’s style were apparent: a concern for history and identity; the central role of an obscure scholarly work; a maze of discourse laden with elaborate and Byzantine detail; footnotes; meticulous references to remote academic journals, and the presence of deliberately translucent paradox.

And, further, in the OED, under “Borgesian” it reads: “Characteristic or reminiscent of the work of Borges, esp. of the intricate, labyrinthine nature of his fictional worlds.”

Thus with these characterizations in mind, the directness of the saga and the labyrinthine qualities of Borges, one could feel justified in writing on the points of intersection between Old Norse saga style and Borges’s prose, to conclude, “Influence of Old Norse saga style on Borges’s prose; there is none.”
In the course of this thesis, however, it will become clear that for the works of Borges and the literature of the North, there are indeed major points where one begins to bear a resemblance to the other, where what is Borgesian and what is sagaesque seem consonant. For as the preface to the seven-volume concordance of Borges’s fiction appropriately attests, “In his own dilettante and individual way, Borges the librarian plundered the world of learning to produce a labyrinth of allusions.” (Ibister I:i) To that end, to see where one meets the other, the best point of entry is, perhaps, the same through which Borges entered, through the story of Odin’s sword.

A Sword’s Story
At the great betrothal feast of Signy, the daughter of Völsung, to Siggeir, king of Gothland, a man with one eye, no shoes, and breaches sewn on so tightly they seem to hug the bone, entered the great hall, approached the tree, Branstock (that grew through the center of Völsung’s hall) and drove his sword into its trunk and declaimed, “fā er þessv sverði. begdr o þstockinum þa skal [sa] þat þiggia at mer ath giof. ok ikal hann þat sealfr fānna. at allðri bar hann betra sverð ser j hendo [en þetta er].” (Völsunga 82) [“Whoso draweth this sword from this stock, shall have the same as a gift from me, and shall find in good sooth that never bare he better sword in hand than is this.” (Morris 7)] The old man vanishes, just as mysteriously as he came and leaves the men to sort out who will try their mettle first, as all are convinced that the sword will take little more than the first pull. One after another tries and fails to draw the sword from its place until finally Sigmund, son of Völsung, a man known for his prodigious strength even from his
youth, steps up and “tok ok ba sverðinv o ðockinum ok var sem laút lægi fyrir honum.” [“pulls it from the stock, even as if it lay loose before him” (Morris 7)].

Thus begins the story of Gramr [Gram], the sword pulled from Branstock and its owner Sigmund. With it Sigmund fights the forces of his treacherous brother in law Siggeir, kills at her own request, the little whelps of Signy, achieves revenge for his father’s death, and defends his realm in the Hunlands, and upon his demise his son, Sigurd, is given the sword, and with it coaxed by Regin, smith to the king, to use it to obtain Fafnir the dragon’s gold.

He seeks out Fafnir and develops a plan to kill the beast while it is drinking from a lake. When Fafnir comes down to the lake, Sigurd shoves the sword through his soft underbelly, and out comes the blood, Sigurd safe all the while. Before Fafnir expires, he warns Sigurd that the gold is cursed, and that it is sure to bring him ill fortune. Sigurd disregards the warning, and pulls away the gold with his horse Grani, but not before first being told by the birds that Regin has dark intentions, and then, using Gramr, chops off his head.

On his way back to his mother he comes across a structure made of shields and topped with a banner. In it he finds a sleeping maiden decked out in the trappings of war. With Gramr he cuts through the armor, as if it were fabric, and awakens the warrior: “hun spurde hvat sva var mattukt er beith byniuna ok bra minum svefne” (Vǫlsunga 146) [“she asked—‘What thing of great might is it that has prevailed to rend my byrny, and draw me from my sleep?’” (Morris 69)]. Sigurd says that it was he, a Vǫlsung, and prompts her to tell the story of how she came to be imprisoned in her own armor and in a castle of shields. She says that she is Brynhild, Valkyrie of Odin, and after favoring a king in battle against
Odin’s wish, she was made mortal, doomed to suffer the pains of flesh and to be taken in marriage; she resists complete abasement, however, by vowing to only marry a man that knows no fear. Sigurd is smitten and vows himself to her and gives her a ring from Andvari’s hoard. He then leaves, not to meet her again until much later.

From Brynhild’s keep, he goes to the castle of king Gjuki. Gjuki is married to Grimhild, the sorceress, and with her he has four children: three boys Gunnar, Hogni, and Guttorm and one girl, Gudrun. After Sigurd spends time among them, Grimhild becomes determined that he will be her son-in-law. She makes a tonic of forgetfulness so that Brynhild and the commitment that Sigurd had with her will be lost to memory. It is short order before Sigurd and Gudrun are married. Once Gudrun is married, her two oldest brothers, Gunnar and Hogni, swear their allegiance to Sigurd and commit themselves to be as brothers in blood, and together they’re able to accomplish remarkable deeds. As time passes Grimhild comes to congratulate Gunnar on his achievements and also to sway him to woo Brynhild to be his wife.

Gunnar asks his brothers and Sigurd to go with him on his conquest of Brynhild. When they get to the wall of flames that protected her keep, Gunnar charges the flames but doesn’t have the courage to prod his horse on further. He asks Sigurd if he can try it while riding Grani. Sigurd agrees, but Gunnar only meets the same end. Finally they shift shapes, as Grimhild had taught them, so Gunnar appeared as Sigurd and Sigurd as Gunnar, and Sigurd mounts Grani and charges through the flames. Waiting on the other side was Brynhild. She asks his name, and he says he is Gunnar son of king Gjuki come to ask for her hand. She,
overwhelmed by his fearlessness and authentic manliness, responds, “eigi veit ek giorla hverfu ek ñkal þess sv(ara)” (172) [“I scarcely know what to say” (173)]. For three days and three nights Sigurd, as Gunnar, stays with Brynhild in one bed, but, to her great confusion, “hann tekr fverdit gram ok leggr i meðal þeirra þert” (174) [“he takes the sword Gram and lays it unsheathed between them” (175)]; the sword was to act as a barrier that symbolized his loyalty to Gunnar and commitment to Gudrun.

After the time spent in Brynhild’s keep, Sigurd reunites with Gunnar and the men waiting outside the wall of fire. After receiving council from her stepdad, Brynhild leaves for the keep of king Gjuki to be married, to then consummate their love: in her mind have the sword removed.

When Gunnar and Brynhild have married they live near Sigurd and Gudrun, and on one particular day, as Gudrun and Brynhild were out together they have an argument. As things heat up, Gudrun reveals that Brynhild was actually lying next to Sigurd for those three days, and that it was he that dared brave the flames. Brynhild is incensed and inconsolable. For her it signifies a complete betrayal of her standards and trust: it had been a vow that marked her commitment to live as the gods, even in her punishment.

After a number of days, Brynhild devises a plan to exact revenge. She tells Gunnar that she and Sigurd slept together in her keep, that the sword Gramr had not been placed between them. She convinces him that his connubial response should be decisive: kill Sigurd. Gunnar, however, being bound by his bond of brotherhood, devises with his brother Hogni (who shared the commitment) to drug their youngest brother with a potion of rage, and direct it to Sigurd.
Guttorm, after receiving the potion, goes to the bedchamber of Gudrun and Sigurd while they’re sleeping and stabs Sigurd with such force that the sword passes through him and into the baseboard of the bed. As he’s in retreat, “Sigurdr vaknar vid farit enn gyttthormr geck vt til dyranna þa tok sigurdr sverdit gram ok kaftar eptir honum ok kom a bakit ok tok i funð i midiv fell annan veg fota lvtr enn annan havfuit ok hendurrnar aptr i ðkemmvna.” (192) “Sigurd awoke with that wound, and Guttorm gat him unto the door; but therewith Sigurd caught up the sword Gram, and cast it after him, and it smote him on the back, and struck him asunder in the midst, so that the feet of him fell one way, and the head and hands back into the chamber.” (Morris 115)

After Sigurd reassures his wife that she’ll never find better, that her brothers will never have a better brother-in-law, and that Brynhild orchestrated all of this, he dies, to be avenged by Gudrun who marries Brynhild’s brother Atli and kills Gunnar, Hogni, and Guttorm.

The death brings little comfort to Brynhild. Indeed, she berates Gunnar for breaking his oath to Sigurd, when Sigurd was so loyal that when he “kom til vo hve hann hellt ðina eida at hann lagde ockar. i mille it ðnarp eggiada ðverd þat er eittrí var hert” (194) [“came to me (he) laid betwixt us the sharp-edged sword that in venom had been made hard” (Morris 125)]. She goes on to say that her heart was ever committed to the son of Sigmund, Fafnir’s-bane, and since now he was dead, she no longer had the desire to live. She brings out all of her gold, lays it before the people, telling them to take what they want, and then stabs herself up through the chest. Before she
dies she asks Gunnar that he agree to her last request to have a large funeral pyre built and to lay hers and Sigurd’s bodies next to each other and “latit þar a milli ockar brugðit sverð sem fyr er víð þítum a einn bêð ok heitum þa hiona ok eigi fellr honum þa hvô a hêla” (196–98) [“lay there betwixt us a drawn sword, as in the other days when we twain stepped into one bed together” (Morris 127)]. The sword, of course, was Gramr, gift of Odin.

Thus ends the story of Gramr, intimately and inextricably connected with the fate of Sigmund and Sigurd, father and son. Received as a gift from Odin, it proves instrumental in both securing and maintaining family honor—it becomes a symbol of loyalty and filial duty.

**Borges and the Sword**

The figure of the ancestral warrior—a composite of Colonel Suárez [Borges’s maternal great grandfather] and Colonel Borges [Borges’s Paternal grandfather]—would cast a very long shadow over Georgie. The swords of the two heroes were displayed like sacred relics in the family home in Palermo…. Wherever he looked, Georgie was confronted by the ghosts of his venerable ancestors, holding aloft, as it were, the sword of honor that had conferred such distinction upon them all. (Williamson 38) Jorge Luis Borges was born and reared in his mother’s ancestral home on calle Tucumán where, from his father and paternal grandmother (Fanny Haslam), and also from his mother, he listened to the semi-mythic tales of his ancestors and inherited their anxieties.
Borges’s mother, Leonor, was born into an old and decorated unitario (a liberal group that supported the centralization of the government) family. Her grandfather, Isidoro Suárez, was particularly well known as the great hero of Junín, one of the last engagements in the liberation of South America. As the story goes, on August 6, 1824, on the high mountain peaks of Peru, Isidoro led the cavalry charge, at the tender age of twenty-four that turned the tide of the battle of Junín, a battle fought not with muskets or canons, but with the brute force of horse, man, and sword. The sword thus becomes the family symbol for the honor and history of their great people. After his victory, Isidoro was promoted by Bolívar himself to the rank of colonel and went on to perform valiantly in the last battle, Ayacucho, which ended Spanish reign in the Americas. He was a national hero in Argentina and a continental hero for all of Latin America.

Borges’s paternal grandfather, Colonel Francisco Borges, has a more complicated story. From nineteen up to his death he served in the military, eventually reaching the rank of colonel. He was an intense nationalist who felt compelled to live or die for his country and thus gained fame as a decorated soldier in the fight against the chaos of the pampas. As Argentinians embraced the European enlightenment, they became ever more interested in civilizing its frontier and subjugating its people, the gauchos. The object that emerges as the symbol of this wild, uncivilized, and history-void place and people, from Borges’s pen, was the dagger. Francisco had a number of victories that won him fame and respect, but, as an influential military leader, it wasn’t long before he became entangled in political wrangling, such that he eventually forfeited his position
with one faction to take up arms for the other, which, incidentally, was the losing one. He died in one of the early, and only, battles of the political conflict. Fanny Haslam, Francisco’s wife and Jorge Luis Borges’s grandmother, a proud English woman, was left to raise their two sons with little money and no position. Francisco’s death was devastating for the family’s sense of identity and honor. Fanny spent Jorge Borges’s (Jorge Luis’s father) childhood re-contextualizing and revising the story of her husband’s defeat.

Thus, due to political trappings, Francisco Borges was lost to the annals of honor, a fate, in fact, not altogether different from that of the hero of Junín, Colonel Suárez. After he had won fame as the great liberator and leader of the war of independence, he, much like Francisco, picked the losing side. Juan Manuel de Rosas was the political leader at the time whose rise to prominence relied on the slogan “long live the Federation! Death to the filthy, savage Unitarios” (Williamson 5). Colonel Suarez was Unitario and so necessarily died in exile.

As these illustrious ancestors of Borges died, in exile and obscurity, their ancestors languished in their bygone glory. Colonel Suárez’s granddaughter, Leonor, and Colonel Borges’s son, Jorge, grew up hearing stories of honor and wealth lost, one day, perhaps, to be recovered by their descendants. When Leonor and Jorge married and the lines of these two storied families fused, the quest for a return to stature and greatness was amplified. They would rear their two children, nested in the family mansion-museum, suffused with the family lore. For Leonor especially, rescuing the family name was little less than an obsession,
an obsession that like her parents pushed her to teach little Jorge Luis about the family and his role in rescuing it.

Jorge Luis went on to dedicate, in a way, his life to that mission of recovery, of bringing back the rightful family fame. Unlike his father and maternal grandfather, however, he would be successful. So successful that he exceeded anything his ancestors achieved. For him it was in his literature, most particularly from his short stories, for which he was recognized as a master of Spanish prose, creating, as some view it, a space for Spanish literature in the general, international community. In short, Jorge Luis, was the fulfillment of the potential of his lineage.

This ascent was not without its anxieties and fears. As Williamson asserts, for Jorge Luis Borges there was always conflict, a conflict between honor and independence, between savagery and civilization, between conformity and abandon. In his works, the two sides of this conflict are symbolized, on the one side—that of honor—it took the symbol of the sword: the great battle of Junín and of Isidor Suárez was fought with swords and strength, the last stand of Francisco Borges (as told by Leonor) was with Francisco brandishing his sword in defiance of the forces that threatened the liberty of the people. On the other side, it was the dagger that pressed itself on the consciousness of Borges as the emblem of chaos: Francisco went on the pampas to bring an end to the anarchy, the bedlam of the *gauchos* who were known for their knife fights and opposition to authority.
“El Zahir” and the Sword
In Borges’s “El Zahir,” the protagonist, also named Borges, attempts to chronicle the history of his brief, consuming obsession with a coin. The story itself can be broken down into three parts: the crush on Teodelina Villar, receiving and possessing the Zahir, and the memory of it all.

Teodelina was a model, socialite, and fashionista, who had been featured in various cosmetic and automobile adds and had prided herself in perfection. When she died on the sixth of June, leaving the narrator and the rest of the world spinning, Borges (the protagonist) laments the awkward attempts at eulogizing someone so crucial and central to human consciousness, and thus attempts to do it himself. He comments on how in the natural course of decay, her face appears as it once did twenty years previous, full of dignity and pride. Of this transformation he remarks,

sus rasgos recobraron la autoridad que dan la soberbia, el dinero, la juventud, la conciencia de coronar una jerarquía, la falta de imaginación, las limitaciones, la estolidez. Más o menos pensé: ninguna versión de esa cara que tanto me inquietó sera tan memorable como ésta; conviene que sea la última, ya que pudo ser la primera. (El Aleph 121)

her features recovered the authority supplied by hauteur, money, youth, the awareness of crowning a hierarchy, a lack of imagination, a certain limitation, stolidity. I thought, more or less, thus: no version of this face, which had so unsettled me, will be as memorable as the one I now saw; better that it be the last, especially since it could have been the first.

(Personal 130)
After making this observation he leaves Teodelina’s wake and walks through the city in a sad and disoriented stupor. Around three in the morning, he comes across a bar that is still open. After ordering a glass of brandy he receives his change. It is there that he encounters the Zahir: a small coin with a number of markings that looks as if someone had taken a penknife to it. While contemplating the coin, he thinks of the way that coins represents human desire and free will; i.e. how everything from the music of Brahms to chess pieces can be found in (or bought with) a coin. He philosophizes about the nature of the universe and the ephemerality of man, here, early on, realizing that the coin has the power to consume his consciousness, to be the one all-consuming thought.

The next morning he wakes with the conviction that it was all a dream, but that it is still important to dispose of the coin. He deliberately loses himself in the city, ignoring anything that would help him if he were to try and recover the coin, and eventually spends it, conscientiously, studiously ignoring his surroundings.

Between losing the coin in this way and spending what he assumes will be the rest of his life, his every moment wearing it away with his thoughts, he has a brief period of reprieve. In his words:

Hasta fines de junio me distrajo la tarea de componer un relato fantástico. Éste encierra dos o tres perífrasis enigmáticas—en lugar de sangre pone agua de la espada; en lugar de oro, lecho de la serpiente—y está escrito en primera persona. El narrador es una asceta que ha renunciado al trato de los hombres y vive en una suerte de páramo. (Gnitaheidr es el nombre de ese lugar.) Dado el candor y la sencillez de su vida, hay quienes lo juzgan un ángel; ello es una piadosa exageración, porque no hay hombre que esté
libre de culpa. Sin ir más lejos, él mismo ha degollado a su padre; bien es verdad que éste era un famoso hechicero que se había apoderado, por artes mágicas, de un tesoro infinito. Resguardar el tesoro de la insana codicia de los humanos es la misión a la que ha dedicado su vida; día y noche vela sobre él. Pronto, quizá demasiado pronto, esa vigilia tendrá fin: las estrellas le han dicho que ya se ha forjado la espada que la tronchará para siempre (Gram es el nombre de esa espada.) En un estilo cada vez más tortuoso, pondera el brillo y la flexibilidad de su cuerpo; en algún párrafo habla distraídamente de escamas; en otro dice que el tesoro que guarda es de oro fulgurante y de anillos rojos. Al final entendemos que el asceta es la serpiente Fafnir y el tesoro en que yace, el de los Nibelungos. La aparición de Sigurd corta bruscamente la historia.

He dicho que la ejecución de esa fruslería (en cuyo decurso intercalé, seudoeruditamente, algún verso de la Fáfnismál) me permitió olvidar la moneda. (El Aleph 124–6)

The composition of a tale of fantasy served to distract me until the end of June. This tale involves two or three enigmatic periphrases: in place of blood I wrote sword’s water; gold is serpent’s bed. And the story is told in the first person. The narrator is an ascetic who has renounced all dealings with men and who lives in a kind of desert. (The name of this place is Gnitaheidr.) He leads a simple candid life, and some people, therefore, consider him an angel; such a view is a pious exaggeration, for no man is free of sin. To go no further afield, our man has cut his father’s throat; true enough, the father was a famous wizard and had gotten his
hands on an infinite treasure by the use of magical arts. Our man, then, has now dedicated his life to guarding this treasure from the insane greed of humankind. He stands watch day and night. Soon perhaps too soon, his vigil will come to an end: the stars have revealed to him that the sword which will cut it short has already been forged. (The name of the swords is Gram.) In an increasingly tortuous style, he considers the sheen and suppleness of his own body; in some paragraph or other he speaks distractedly of body scales; in still another he states that the treasure he guards is a hoard of fulgent gold and reddish rings. Finally we realize that the ascetic is the serpent Fafnir and that the treasure on which he lies is the Treasure of the Nibelungs. The appearance of Sigurd brings the story to an abrupt end.

As I have already said, the composition of this trifle (in the course of whose narrative I intercalated, with pseudo-erudition, and occasional line from the Fáfnismál) allowed me to forget the existence of the coin. (Personal 132–3)

**General Thesis and Approach**

Borges’s choice of story for distracting him from the trance of the Zahir could not have been more appropriate, both in its thematic relevance and, more central to the focus of this paper, in providing a template for Borges’s sustained engagement with Scandinavian literature throughout his career.

In “El Zahir” his character Borges is lost in two things, Teodelina Villar and a single coin, and the only thing that can distract him, albeit for little less
than a month, is a strong reading and re-writing of the myth of Sigurd and Fafnir: Fafnir becomes the noble hero, sacrificing himself to protect the gold destined to bring doom and destruction, and Sigurd, and more pointedly, his sword Gram, become the enemy. The act here of the fictive Borges mirrors that of the real-life.

Edwin Williamson has already, quite adroitly, discussed the symbol of the sword and the dagger at length in his biography of Borges, *Borges a Life*. According to Williamson, the sword represents for Borges civilization and conformity, ancestry and history, and more to the heart of it, family and worldly esteem: that for which Leonor, his mother, and Jorge, his father (albeit differently), were ever in anxious pursuit. Contrariwise, the dagger, for Williamson, was Borges’s symbol for the subversive, the counter-culture, and the ahistorical. According to Williamson, Borges continually felt the pull and the appeal of both; he was ever caught between the demands of familial propriety and greatness and the beauty of abandon, the relief of recklessness.

Much in line with Williamson’s contentions, I believe there was in fact this constant pull of extremes on Borges, that there is biographical and literary evidence that there was this struggle and that it was symbolized by the sword and the dagger. I depart from Williamson, however, in how this plays out with Borges’s relationship with Scandinavia and with Iceland in particular. The Scandinavian sword, perhaps we could call it Gramr, is able to bestride this division: it at once represents honor and approbation on one side and impetuosity and unprepossessing candor on the other. For it there was the valor and courage of the battlefield, used to defend the honor of children and spouse (think Sigmund and Hjordis), and likewise the dagger-like chicanery used for
quick, behind-the-scenes plotting (think Sigmund and Signy or Sigurd and Brynhild or Guttorm, Gudrun, Sigurd, and Brynhild). Put differently, but with the same meaning, Borges found a literary home in Scandinavian literature. There, ancestral demands and momentary opportunism ran conterminously. As in “El Zahir” it provided an oasis from those two competing obsessions. And also as in “El Zahir” it often found its way into Borges’s own output as strong readings of Nordic texts. Much in line with Harold Bloom’s sense of the “strong” reading that appropriates the precursor text in subversive and creative ways, ways that produce wholly original works.

In the following pages and chapters, I will follow this Nordic thread as it winds its way through the various phases of Borges’s oeuvre. In chapter two, I will provide a detailed survey and analysis of exemplary minor texts that highlight Borges’s protracted engagement with Nordic sources and highlight his use of those texts to satisfy the impulse of achieving both family esteem and the satisfaction of dissention. In chapters three and four, I will do close readings of two of Borges’s short stories from his later collection El Libro de Arena: “Undr” and “Ulrica.” In these two stories, particularly “Ulrica,” the strong reading of two central texts will be made most clear. In the final chapter, I will conclude with summary and suggestions for future scholarship.

In short, besides discovering and analyzing the intertextual connections between Borges’s texts and Old Norse works, this study will be modeled on Daniel Balderston’s research in Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges. Of this approach, he writes:

What I propose to do here is to show how an imaginative reading of
Borges’s texts that is attentive to historical and political context can discover implications in those texts that considerably complicate the picture we have had up to now of the “postulation of reality” in Borges.... I would argue that the interest of the stories is considerably heightened by attention to the historical and political elements. (5)

In addition to the more global historical and political issues Balderston emphasizes, the focus here also includes significant details from Borges’s own history to help clarify the import of the references to Old Icelandic texts. Part of the justification for this is the same passage of Borges to which Balderston appeals for his analysis:

Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino (a diferencia del infierno de Swedenborg y del infierno de las mitología y del infierno de la mitología tibetana) no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, so Borges (“Nueva refutación del tiempo”)

To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, are apparent acts of desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg or the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightening because it is unreal: it is frightening because it is irreversible and ironclad. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time
is a river that sweeps me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that tears me apart, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.

The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. (Balderston 4)

In the end, my point is not to overstate the case and suggest that once the Nordic sources are discovered, the answer to the riddle that is Borges and his writings will come into focus and be made obvious, but rather to show how for Borges Scandinavian literature was often the source material that thematically, in both biographical and literary terms, assuaged his creative aspirations, to show that from the seedbed of the sagas, the Eddic and skaldic poems, Borges crafted texts that fulfilled, symbolically, his ancestral and personal dreams.
Chapter 2

¿Qué secretos caminos me condujeron al amor de los escandinavo? Tal vez los de sangre, ya que mi gente, por lado paterno, venía de Yorkshire, que fue predio de vikings. (Esta remota explicación no me satisface; nadie busca lo que ya tiene.) Tal vez un ejemplar de la Völsunga Saga que mi padre me dio hará medio siglo, traducida por Morris y por Magnússon a un arcaico dialecto del inglés, casi puramente sajón. (Borges, “Seis” 110)

What secret roads led me to the love of all things Scandinavian? Maybe the ties of blood, since my people on my father’s side came from Northumberland, which once was Viking country. (This rather farfetched explanation is hardly sufficient; nobody yearns for what is already his.) Maybe a copy of the Völsunga Saga my father gave me about half a century ago, translated by Williams Morris and Erikr Magnússon into a kind of archaic, almost purely Saxon English. (Sigrún 381)

Survey

General Comments and Outline

As the epigraph suggests, a historical survey of Borges’s engagement with Scandinavian texts would prove difficult. Starting perhaps before he was thirteen or fourteen, Borges was reading broadly and regularly from the major Scandinavian, and more generally Germanic, texts, and to attempt to track down exactly which ones, for lack of evidence to substantiate any claim, would prove fruitless. There are of course two notable exceptions to that general statement, where Borges himself describes his early involvement: The Völsunga Saga and The Prose Edda. The first will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter,
and the latter to be discussed in the last part of this chapter. Instead then of surveying the more covert connections to Scandinavian texts that would be inherent in that type of sleuthing and source commentary, the focus here will be on those texts where the links to Nordic source material are made explicit, explicit insofar as they are signaled in the very titles or in the stated subject. The purpose, as emphasized in the introduction, is not to ferret out allusions, although that will play a role in subsequent chapters, but to show how Borges, as the protagonist Borges did in “El Zahir,” twists the Nordic texts in such a way that satisfies biographical and literary interests. The general assertions for this analysis are: 1. the Nordic texts prove to be unusually supple and malleable for these type of strong readings, and 2. given that flexibility they still maintain their identity as Nordic texts under their Borgesian façade.

The survey, then, will unfold into three major sections: first, literary criticism; second, poetry and prose fiction; and third, translation.

**Literary Criticism**

**Las “Kenningar”**

In August of 1932 Borges published, in one of Argentina’s major literary journals, *Sur* (incidentally ran and founded by close friends of Borges), a rather lengthy article on the Icelandic kenning, a metaphorical pairing of two dissimilar nouns (e.g., the “whale’s road” for the sea). The article was later reedited and published in Borges’s collection of essays *Historia de la eternidad*. Of the collection in general Williamson states:
What readership could Borges have had in mind for this miscellany of outlandish texts? Bereft of a key to their autobiographical context, no one could have grasped the vivid significance these pieces actually had for their author. Borges had withdrawn so far into his private world that he had effectively severed all communication with his readers. *A History of Eternity* was to mark the nadir of his fortunes as a writer. (216)

More on the autobiographical details in a moment. The collection, in the end, only sold thirty-seven copies. That disappointing response did not discourage Borges, however, especially as it concerns the piece on kennings—he made minor adjustments to and republished his chapter from *Historia* in 1951 in *Antiguas Literaturas Germanicas* in 1965 in *Literaturas Germanicas Medievales* and in English for *The New Yorker* in January of 1976.

The general structure of the essay is the following: the opening three pages reflecting on the literary effect of these verbal puzzles, the next five pages offering a detailed catalogue of some of the various kennings he had encountered, the following three pages positioning the kennings in a literary history of both Scandinavian focus and more broadly that of Western literature in general, and ending with further general observations and two postscripts, one undated and the other from 1962.

It is there, in the two postscripts, that the most revealing, at least as it concerns this essay, comments are to be had. The end of the first postscript reads, “El ultraísta muerto cuyo fantasma sigue siempre habitándome goza con estos juegos. Los dedico a una clara compañera: a Norah Lange, cuya sangre los reconocerá por ventura” (OC 1:715) [the dead ultraísta, whose ghost haunts me
continually, enjoys these games. I dedicate them to a Nordic friend: to Norah Lange, in whose heritage it might find resonance]. And in the second postscript he lists some of the most helpful books he has read to inform his understanding of the kennings. Two of the most prominent are *The Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson and translated by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur and *Völsunga Saga* translated by Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris.

Ultraísmo was a poetic movement “characterized by a tendency to use free verse, complicated metrical innovations, and daring imagery and symbolism instead of traditional form and content” (“Ultraism”). While Borges was with his family in Europe during the First World War and while they were consulting doctors about Jorge Sr.’s eyesight, Jorge Luis became involved with many of the Spanish literati, namely Guillermo de Torre (who eventually became his brother-in-law) and Rafael Cansinos-Asséns. Through these associations, through their frequent meetings and debates, Borges was introduced to and helped formulate the tenets of the Ultraísmo movement, and after returning from Spain, Borges was instrumental in promoting the movement in Argentina. Among those that became committed to the Ultraíst aesthetic were the bewitching Lange sisters, and principal among them was the youngest, Norah Lange.

Norah Lange was seven years Borges’s junior, a fact that didn’t prevent him from being attracted to her in a way that perhaps rivaled any other relationship he had. In describing her appearance, Williamson says, “her red hair spoke of passion, but her pale, Scandinavian looks called to mind the purity of an angel, and it was this tantalizing blend of innocence and fire that she captured in dream poems charged with erotic anticipation.” (126) She was for Borges the
culmination of feminine beauty and desire. Each week her family’s house acted as the center for the major Argentine literary salons, and almost every weekend the Lange sisters were the hosts of the parties and dances frequented by Argentina’s literary elite. Borges attended them all. To say that he aggressively pursued Norah would be misleading, Borges was never aggressive, but he did, in his subtle awkwardness, do everything he could to make his intentions clear.

In addition to these romantic gestures, and with the support of the Langes, Francisco Fernández, and Leopoldo Marechal, among others, Borges was able to spearhead (or, at a minimum, act as a major intellectual proponent) the founding of no fewer than three magazines dedicated to the Ultraísta cause: *Prisma*, *Proa*, and *Martin Fierro*.

It wasn’t until some years later, when Norah began to reciprocate Borges’s signs of affection, that Borges famously gave his 1927 denunciation of Ultraísmo in his credo “Profesiòn de Fe Literaria” [“A Profession of Literary Faith)]. In this profession his “postulado: toda literature es autobiográfica, finalmente. Todo es poético en cuanto nos confiesa un destino, en cuanto nos da una vislumbre de él” (128) [“postulate is that all literature, in the end, is autobiographical. Everything is poetic that confesses, that gives us a glimpse of a destiny.” (*Selected Non-Fiction* 23)] He goes on to describe the technical elements of a poem written in Uruguay by Fernán Silva Valdés, “Son una metáfora bien metida en la realidad y hecha momento de un destino que cree en ella de veras y que se alegra con su milagro y hasta quiere compartirlo con otros” (129) [“They are a metaphor firmly enmeshed in reality, shaped into the moment of a destiny that truly believes in it, that delights in its miracle and even wishes to share it with others.” (*Selected Non-Fiction* 23)]
And lastly he says that when “bien examinados, los versos que nos gustan a pesar nuestro, bosquejan siempre un alma, una idiosincrasia, un destino. Más aun: hay cosas que por solo implicar destinos, ya son poéticas” [“studied carefully, the verses we like despite ourselves always depict a soul, an idiosyncracy, a destiny. What’s more, there are things that are poetic by merely implying a destiny” (Selected Non-Fiction 25)]. In short, Borges’s “Profesión de Fe Literaria” and thus his denunciation of Ultraístic decadence, is one of tremendous optimism—there can be communion between the I of the author and that of the reader. Where Ultraísmo specialized in obscurity and, in a way, authorial indifference, Borges’s new vision, new credo, was one of dialogue and correspondence.

If literature is in the end autobiographical, so, at least in this case, is literary criticism. Borges, perhaps for the first time in his life, was exhibiting himself emotionally, extending himself into the sphere of another, and receiving a positive response. Gone were the days of solipsism and solitude, insecurity and distance, and here were those of genuine connection, such that Norah and Borges would go on to spend almost the entirety of Borges’s twenty-seventh year together. There’s little mystery then behind the pronouncement of his faith in literature’s ability to create just such connections.

For Borges, however, joy was rarely long-lived, and such was the case for his tryst with Norah. While at a party, Borges introduced Norah to Oliverio Girondo, one of the members of the Argentine Avant-Garde. Girondo was eight years Borges’s senior and in many ways could not have been more different than Jorge Luis. He was confident, smooth, and seemingly had greater professional
promise. Of this first meeting with Girondo, Norah would later say, “[Oliverio] era vital, apasionado. Y me enamoré de él desde ese día.” (de Nobile 14) [“Oliverio was vital, passionate. I was in love with him from that day on.” (Williamson 149)] Borges was sunk, he was neither vital nor passionate, and that was what Norah needed. He was completely dejected. He had invested himself in his relationship with Norah, and with her rejection, it felt as if all of his former self was lost. He attempted to win her back but without success: ultimately she was lost to him, never to return.

For Borges’s output, the years that followed were marked as being particularly abstruse and insular. The first essay that signals this shift is “Indagación de la Palabra” (“An investigation of the word”). The essay starts with a tedious and painstaking look at the first sentence of *Don Quixote*, where he parses each word’s syntactic role. After working through the first sentence, and probing the importance of each word, he offers a summary conclusion, “La definición que daré de la palabra es—como las otras—verbal, es decir también de palabras, es sotodecir pabrera.” (20) [“The definition I shall give of the word (therefore) is—like others—verbal, that is to say, also made of words, that is to say, wordy.... a word’s determining factor is its function as representative unit and how variable and contingent that function is.” (Selected Non-Fiction 37)] This comes as a pronounced movement away from that sense of connection he had proclaimed in his earlier essay, in his credo. His affection, his Eros, here becomes symbolically stymied by the word, by Logos. In the end he says, for nosotros, los verbales, los que ‘en este bajo, relativo suelo’ escribimos, los que sotopensamos que ascender a letras de molde es la máxima realidad.
de las experiencias? Que la resignación—virtud a que debemos resignarnos—sea con nosotros. Ella será nuestro destino: hacernos a la sintaxis, a su concatenación traicionera, a la imprecisión, a los talveces, a los demasiados énfasis, a los peros, al hemisferio de mentira y de sombra en nuestro decir. (24)

those of us ... who are verbal, who ‘on this low, relative ground’ write, (for) those of us who lowly imagine that ascending into print is the maximum reality of experiences ... May resignation—the virtue to which we must resign ourselves—be with us. It will be our destiny to mold ourselves to syntax, to its treacherous chain of events, to the imprecision, the maybes, the too many emphases, the buts, the hemisphere of lies and of darkness in our speech. (Selected Non-Fiction 39)

It is here, in biographical details of Borges’s life, as Williamson’s above quotation suggests, that one must take as the entry point for understanding Historia de la Eternidad in general and “Las Kenningar” in particular, for Borges is at a low, the nadir of cynicism, skepticism, and mistrust, and the Nordic kenning seems a likely vessel to convey that.

He starts the essay on kennings with a seemingly innocuous comment of literary history, but when read next to the essays conclusion it becomes uniquely Borgesian in style and content. The opening comment reads:

Una de las más frías aberraciones que las historias registran, son las menciones enigmáticas o kenningar de la poesía Islandia.... Es común atribuirlas a decadencia; pero ese depresivo dictamen, válido o no, corresponde a la solución del problema, no a su planteo. Bástenos
reconocer por ahora que fueron el primer deliberado goce verbal de una literatura instintiva. (Obras Completas I 704)

(One of the coldest aberrations in the annals of history, are those enigmatic constructions or kenningar of Icelandic poetry.... It is commonplace for them to be ascribed to decadence; but this depressing opinion, valid or not, is more to the solution of the problem than its origin. For now, suffice it to say that they were the first deliberate verbal pleasures of instinctive literature.)

The ending of the essay reads

Las kenningar nos dictan ese asombro, nos extrañan del mundo. Pueden motivar esa lúcida perplejidad que es el único honor de la metafísica, su remuneración y su fuente. (715)

(The kennings give us this wonder, they make the world seem strange. They can motivate this lucid perplexity that is the solemn honor of metaphysics, its payment and its source.)

The essay, then, starts by suggesting that the assertion that the kenning is sheer decadence may in fact be true, but that it doesn’t get to the heart of them, the vital force behind their wordplay. For Borges they represent a more earthy and modest conceit, at least initially. They started as yet another example of man’s natural instinct to metaphorize, to link unlike elements. In contrast to what generally emerged from that impulse, however, the Kennings were uniquely, cerebrally sterile: to use Borges’s formulation, their “solution” or ending was a decadent one. To this, Borges’s 1976 essay that appeared in The New Yorker adds clarity:
The meaning [of kennings] is irrelevant, the suggestion of little value. They neither stir the imagination nor call up images or emotions; they are not points of departure but ends in themselves. Their pleasure—their sufficient pleasure—lies in their variety, in the unexpected linking together of the words.... Aristotle wrote that metaphor springs from the perception of an affinity between dissimilar things.... Kennings, on the other hand, are, or seem to be, the result of a mental process that looks for an accidental likeness. They answer to no particular feeling. They are the outcome of a deliberate combining process, not of a sudden discovery of hidden affinities. Mere logic may justify them, not human sentiment. (36)

For Borges the kenning offers a false metaphysics; it makes gestures towards transcendence, but, as if facing a mirror, it only reflects the infinite regression of human consciousness. Where his sense was once optimistic and hopeful that expression could reach outwards and perhaps engage the other dialogically, now he’s resigned to the tyranny of syntax and the isolation of the “hemisferio de mentira” (Indagación 24) [“hemisphere of lies” (Selected Non-Fiction 39)]

So to answer Williamson’s question, “What readership could Borges have had in mind for this miscellany of outlandish texts [Historia de la Eternidad]?” (216) The answer quite simply is none. And with only 37 copies being purchased, that’s almost precisely what he got. Borges had lost his first major love, and with that his hope in inter-personal communion. As the Borges in “El Zahir” lost his one-of-a-kind Teodelina and found recourse in Nordic literature, so did the thirty-two year old Borges find that the rigor and dispassion of the North symbolized his destination, or at least his hope.
Returning to those concluding lines of the first postscript, his recollection of his days as Ultraist poet and his dedication to Norah Lange, it seems clear that as much as it was literary criticism, Borges’s exposition on kennings was something deeply personal. His reading of the kenning was not an attempt to project himself anachronistically into the past, into the point of their first utterance, or inscription, but to pull them forward and fit them into modern sensibilities. It’s dubious at best to say that for Egill, Sigurd, Njall, or the like, a kenning and the process by which it was engendered could profoundly disturb their metaphysical underpinnings, and to them “extrañan del mundo” [make the world seem strange]. But to Borges they could, for his strong reading they symbolized the solipsism that preceded the affection of Norah Lange (i.e. Ultraísmo) and that which followed.

**Antiguas Literaturas Germanicas and Literaturas Germanicas Medievales**

Fondo de Cultura Económica published *Antiguas Literaturas Germanicas* (ALG) in 1951, and almost fifteen years later *Literaturas Germanicas Medievales* (LGM) was published by Falbo Librero Editor. In these two works, Borges is attempting to introduce Latin America to a particular hobby of his: Medieval Germanic texts. His conceptualization of this body of literature, however, does not come as a straightforward literary history. Indeed it takes on a certain flavor that would, for a reader of Borges, not come as wholly foreign.

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1 Here I follow Teodosio Fernández’s lead in what have become the standardized abbreviations of these two texts.
Additionally, on the matter of revision, in almost every respect *Literaturas Germanicas* and *Antiguas Literaturas* are identical. That said, there are still differences, and knowing those differences is important to understanding Borges’s approach to and reading of the Old Norse texts. Thus, in this section of the survey, a general overview of the content and character of the work will be given, the two books will be juxtaposed to highlight the differences between them, each will be contextualized to show their place within Borges’s biographical context, and finally everything will be brought together to show how, much like the Borges of “El Zahir,” these books reflect more a strong reading by Borges that fits that ever present sense of the Borgesian, than they do as genuine works of literary historiography.

Overview

In terms of a general overview for the character of the work, perhaps the passage that best makes explicit what seems to lurk in the background throughout the discussion of all three areas of Old Germanic texts (i.e. Old English, Old Germanic, and Old Norse), is Borges’s brief assessment of Nordic texts specifically:

Más extraño y más parecido a los sueños es el destino escandinavo. 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. En el siglo XII, los islandeses descubren la novela, el arte de Cervantes y de
Flaubert, y ese descubrimiento es tan secreto y tan estéril para el resto del mundo, como su descubrimiento de América. (LGM 144)

(More unusual than and bearing greater resemblance to dreams is the Scandinavian destiny. For the universal history, the Scandinavian wars and books are as if they never were; all in isolation and without a trace, as if it all happened in a dream or in those crystal balls consulted by fortunetellers. In the twelfth century, the Icelanders discovered the novel, the art of Cervantes and Flaubert, a discovery, not unlike their discovery of America, that remains so well concealed and barren from the rest of the world.)

For Borges, here, and throughout the work, the appeal is one of shared sympathies. Borges concluded that the Old Germanic work focused on “La tristeza, la lealdad y el coraje” (LGM 104) [sadness, loyalty, and courage]; he saw the Old English work privileging “singularidades individuales” (LGM 105) [individual peculiarities]; and of the Scandinavian texts, he felt their literary claims were quite singular: “Lo que al principio se escribió en Inglaterra o en Alemania vale, porque en buena parte, prefigura, o porque imaginamos que prefigura, lo que se escribiría después…. En cambio, la antigua literatura nórdica vale por cuenta propia” (LGM 111) [That which was originally written in England or Germany is justified because in part it prefigures, or at least because we imagine it does, that which would be written later…. The ancient Nordic literature, however, is justified on its own account].

All of the literature Borges surveys, and at some points studies at greater depth, are justified because they seem haunted by a voice that somehow feels
modern, a voice that reaches beyond its context and finds correspondence to the present, a voice that seems almost Borgesian; a point that will be further examined after considering the differences between the two works and after everything is set to the context of Borges’s biography.

Comparison²

*Antiguas Literaturas Germanicas* begins with the prologue stating that what we have in hand is a “manual, así, no sólo es una introducción al estudio de las antiguas literaturas germánicas; es, también, dentro de su forzosa brevedad, un principio de antología” (7–8) [manual, that is not only an introduction to the study of ancient Germanic literature, but also, within its necessary brevity, the beginnings of an anthology]. The goals seem clear, if not modest: It is an introduction, in Spanish, to significant literature in the major Germanic languages. It doesn’t seem to be making any serious claims to clearing new scholarly ground, but more, to follow Margrét Jónsdóttir’s suggestion, to act as a tour guide to the Spanish speaking world for these foreign texts.

In the prologue to *Literatura Germanicas Medievales* the premise, in its similar humility, seems to be very much the same, but with two important additions: “Este libro quiere reunir la historia de los orígenes de tres literaturas, surgidas de una raíz común, y que complejas vicisitudes históricas fueron

² This type of comparison is first done in Margrét Jónsdóttir’s piece on Borges’s use of medieval Icelandic texts. In fact, she is the only one, up to this point, who has done any formal analysis of these two texts (see 138–50). Her main interest, however, is emphasizing the oddities and inconsistencies in the works to the standard scholarly interpretations. Beyond that, she also spends some time on the resonances of Borges’s voice in these two works.
transformando y alejando (ellos)” (7) [This book desires to bring together the
history of the origin of three literatures, issuing from a common root, and also
(discuss) the complex vicissitudes that transformed and separated them], and
secondly, “este volume no solo es una historia, sino una suerte de antología” (8)
[this volume is not only a story,³ but also a kind of anthology]. This second, later
volume appears to have a more ambitious aim: to not just provide an overview,
which is by definition perfunctory, but to make a scholarly contribution in the
connections it signals. Additionally, it is important to note that Borges intends to
weave a narrative, to create a story of these constituent parts. Indeed, it’s not
until this second work that a number of translations are made of it into various
languages; more attention will be given to the review of the Norwegian
translation in a moment.

From these loftier claims made in the prologue, the question becomes,
what changes were made in the work to justify them? The first most conspicuous
change is the order in which the material is presented. ALG and LGM begin with
a section on Ulfilas, the missionary to the Goths, which is set off from the rest of
the work, in a way as an introduction to the rest of the volume—in this brief
history of Ulfilas, he’s treated as an author, in Borges’s estimation, as the author
of the “monumento más antiguo de las lenguas germánicas” (LGM 13) [the oldest
monument of the Germanic languages]: the translation of the bible into Gothic.
After this section/introduction on Ulfilas, both ALG and LGM analyze what
Borges calls in ALG “Literatura de la Inglaterra Germánica” and in LGM
“Literatura de la Inglaterra Sajona.” After a reasonably long discussion of

³ In context, it seems that story would be the best translation of historia.
medieval English literature, Borges in ALG goes on to medieval Scandinavian literature and ends on medieval Germanic literature, and in LGM from English to medieval Germanic literature and ends on medieval Scandinavian literature and ends on medieval Scandinavian literature and ends on medieval Scandinavian. The reason for this shift seems clear. The first sentence of the Scandinavian section reads, “De las literaturas germánicas medievales la más compleja y rica es incomparablemente la escandinava” (LGM 111) [Of all the medieval Germanic literature, the most rich and complex is without comparison the Scandinavian]. Thus shifting to the end the treatment of Scandinavian texts in the later work, as a kind of climax, is quite natural.

As for the revisions within each section from one text to the next, the changes made in the Scandinavian section seem representative of the changes that are made in the other two sections, i.e. changes of accretion, deletion, and ordering; and only examining those changes (i.e. the ones in the Scandinavian section) is a convenient way of abbreviating what could be a very long, and tedious analysis.

The section begins with general encomium for the body of Nordic works. In LGM, after describing the fate of Scandinavian works, that it found its greatest manifestation in Iceland, as it does in ALG, it adds that Iceland was “la salvación y el último refugio de la antigua cultura pagana” (111) [the salvation and the ultimate refuge of the ancient pagan culture]. Further down, in explicating Viking

4 It should be noted that in LGM, incidental to this change in order, curious errors are introduced; errors that a casual proofread would have probably caught. For instance, under his section on the *Nibelungenlied* Borges starts out by saying he had already touched on the story of Andvari and his tragic loss of gold, which he would have done in the older version, but in the revision doesn't come to until the next section.
epitaphs it adds an additional one, “Que Dios se apiade de las almas de Orm y de Gunnlaug, pero sus cuerpos yacen en Londres” (113)\(^5\) [That God takes pity on the souls of Orm and of Gunnlaug, but their bodies lie in London]. In his study of *Njáls Saga* he describes the last moments of Gunnar’s life where Gunnar asks his wife to make a bowstring from her hair to be able to fend off his attackers, but she refuses in order to revenge herself on Gunnar for slapping her earlier in the story. Of this scene in ALG Borges states, “El narrador no nos había dicho que Hallgerd guardase rencor a su marido; ahora lo sabemos bruscamente, como suelen revelarse las cosas en la realidad” (71) [The narrator had not told us of the bitterness Hallgerd had kept toward her husband; now we suddenly understand, as is customarily the case in reality]. In LGM it reads, “El Texto nada nos había dicho de ese rencor; ahora lo sabemos bruscamente, actual y terrible, con el mismo asombro de Gunnar” (129) [The text had told us nothing of this bitterness; now we suddenly understand, in its present horror, with the same surprise as Gunnar]. While there are certainly more additions, these three are exemplary.

Biographical Details

During the years just preceding the publication of ALG, and certainly during the intervening years its publication and that of LGM, many things of relevant import took place in Borges’s life that would motivate him to even write a book of Germanic literary history and then go on to revise it with, at times, nonessential changes fourteen years later.

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\(^5\) This addition is particularly significant in the following chapters discussion of “*Undr.*"
The first important theme is his employment, which, incidentally, is also integrally connected to the politics of his time. In a way it begins in July of 1946, when Borges, as punishment for signing anti-Perón documents, documents that advocated democratic freedom, was “promoted” from his menial position at the Biblioteca de Miguel Cané (a small and obscure branch of the municipal library) to be an inspector of poultry and rabbit meat for the Buenos Aires public markets; an obvious slight by the Peronist regime. This open insult to one of Argentina’s most respected authors became something of a rallying point for those who had only up to that point been tacitly opposed to Perón. Friends found Borges other employment as a teacher and lecturer on English literature at the Asociación de Cultura Inglesa and at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores. His publications were also sources of a modest income, including the first publication of his work into French in 1951 the same year of ALG’s publication; this French translation was the first in which Borges appeared in any language other than Spanish. He subsisted by these means until September of 1955 when Perón was ousted by a military coup. Shortly after Perón’s departure, Borges was appointed director of the National Library; a victory, no doubt, but one tinged with an irony not unlike Beethoven’s going deaf at the height of his career: in 1954, after falling on the beech and damaging his ocular nerve beyond repair, Borges effectively lost his sight. Nevertheless, Borges was very pleased with his appointment, and, for the first time in a long while, it looked like he was no longer going to be in dire financial straits. In addition to his appointment at the library, in 1956 he was appointed the chair of English and American literature at the University of Buenos Aires. While there, starting around 1958, he began to
study Old English in earnest. He invited numerous students to his apartment each Saturday to do readings of canonical Old-English texts. There are several reports where after such a meeting Borges and his students would take to the streets and “declaim a passage they had succeeded in deciphering that morning.” (Williamson 343)

These were wonderful days for Borges. In addition to his official appointments, and in a large part due to the French translation of his work in 1951, his writing began developing a larger readership. In 1961, with no special effort on the part of Borges, he was notified that he and Samuel Beckett had been jointly awarded the International Publisher’s Prize, a prize patronized by six major publishing houses in Britain, the U.S., Germany, Italy, Spain, and France. Beyond the award money of five-thousand dollars, each publisher committed to commission the translation and publication of Borges’s works in each of their respective languages. In Borges’s estimation, this was the major turning point in his literary success. In his own words, “As a consequence of that prize, my books mushroomed overnight throughout the Western world.” (Williamson 254)

With the publication of his books in the major European languages, Borges became a very sought after figure. He began book and speaking tours through various countries in Europe and in the United States. In 1961 he was invited to teach a special seminar at the University of Texas at Austin, and, in the coming years he would tour and at times teach at many universities (including the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in 1967–1968) throughout the eastern part of the United States. Borges would often go on to say how he, in a way, had to find his voice during these first years of his success. He was never comfortable
lecturing in large groups, he had always felt more at home in the smaller more intimate settings. But as one engagement led to another, Borges developed a greater degree of confidence, and greater ability.

The second major theme that will help explain Borges’s motivations for writing ALG and then revising it in LGM is best described as his relationship with women. In the years between 1947 and 1965, Borges had no fewer than four serious (at times to the point of engagement and marriage) relationships. The principle three were, Estela Canto, Cecilia Ingenieros, and María Esther Vázquez.

The most complex of those three was, to be sure, Estela Canto. Their first period together started in August of 1944 (see Williamson 275) when they were introduced by Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo. In typical fashion, Borges threw himself into the relationship. Estela reciprocated up to a point, but due to Borges’s relationship with his mother, found it difficult to become completely committed. Estela felt quite free-spirited and independent and did not think it appropriate that Borges at forty-five years of age should still report his comings and goings to his mother. After spending considerable time away from Georgie, she eventually brought it to an unequivocal end in June of 1946. After that split, Estela and Borges had two further reprisals of their affections, the first in 1949 and then again in 1955 when Estela returned to Buenos Aires to care for her mother after having lived in Europe for several years. The second round was said to be brought to an end, again because of Doña Leonor (Borges’s Mother), and the third ended in 1955 because of a political disagreement.

The second relationship, with Cecilia Ingenieros, was perhaps the shortest lived. After his first breakup with Estela, Borges became much taken with the
daughter of José Ingenieros, a prominent author of the previous generation.

Cecilia was a professional ballet dancer who owned her own ballet company. Of the details of this relationship, very little information is available. In an interview some time after the fact Borges described the way she broke things off in 1948:

She asked me to meet her at a tearoom…. I hadn’t spoken to her for some time and thought, ‘How strange that she called me,’ and I was feeling very happy, and then she said to me, ‘I want to tell you something you’re going to hear anyway ... I’ve become engaged and I’m going to be married.’ So I congratulated her, and that was that.’ (qtd. in Williamson 302)

From his time with Cecilia, however, came a productive meeting: Borges was put in contact with Cecilia’s older sister Delia, to whom credit of co-authorship is given in ALG.

The final inamorata, María Esther Vázquez, came in 1963. Borges was now sixty-four, widely respected in and outside of Argentina, and especially busy. He had known María while she worked at the National Library in the late fifties, but, because she was in a serious relationship (incidentally with someone that had positioned himself as one of the earliest Borges scholars) at that time, he had not thought of her in romantic terms. It just so happened, though, that Borges, who was becoming more and more in demand, needed someone to accompany him on one of his tours of Europe. This role was usually quite willingly filled by Doña Leonor, but due to her age (88) and having been tired out by the previous year’s travels, she was not up to it. María went with him to England, Germany, Denmark (only to see the castle at Elsinore), and various other European countries. On this trip, Borges’s interest in all things Scandinavian intensified,
and upon his return, with María’s help, Borges took up ALG and began the process of revision. This was the first work of a fairly productive period of collaboration.

After some time working with Borges as an assistant, attending various social functions where Borges went to great pains to introduce her to his notable friends and colleagues, and, in every sense, giving the impression that she and Borges were a couple, she informed Borges, while he was at the Peruvian embassy being invested with the Order of the Sun, that she would be getting married in three weeks time to Horacio Armani.

The three of these relationships have a few things in common. The first, and perhaps most painful element of them all, was that Borges was particularly maladroit when it came to matters of the heart. In one particularly memorable passage, Williamson summarizes Borges’s attempts at love:

Such friendships [with women collaborators] amplified a reputation Borges had acquired since the early 1930s for a kind of adolescent naïveté in affairs of the heart. There was always a woman whom Borges was said to be wooing ... Yet no one seemed to take such liaisons seriously, not even, in most cases, the ladies in question, who were content to be flattered by the attentions of one of the leading writers in the country. Indeed, not a few of these ladies derived a certain amusement ... [of] Borges’s adolescent gushing over them. (300)

That almost all of Borges’s relationships ended with the women announcing forthcoming marriages with other men is telling. His sense of awareness was limited and understanding of each relationship’s status was short-sighted. Part of
this may be due to the second common characteristic of these relationships: they all seemed quasi-professional. That is to say, all of his relationships played the dual role of friendship and collaboration, and often, of both, the latter was privileged. Borges seemed incapable of engaging the other without a literary intermediary: for Estela it consisted of some of his most well-known stories that were eventually compiled in *El Aleph*, including “El Zahir,” and numerous works of literary criticism, for Cecilia it came in the form of various adaptations and even a script for a ballet, and for María it took on the form of various revisions of earlier works (particularly ALG into LGM) and renewed attempts at earlier literary questions.

Another common denominator among these women was Leonor’s intense disapproval of each. Indeed, in Williamson’s words,

Far from being promiscuous in his affections, Borges was, if anything, too selective; he obeyed a single, involuntary criterion—he fell for women who would be unacceptable to Mother, either because they came from an inferior social class or because they did not meet the high standards of respectability required by Doña Leonor. Rebellion against Mother was the prerequisite of love.... The thrill of rebellion was added the thrill of moral danger, and both converged in the figure of the *compadrito*, the delinquent knife fighter, who became the embodiment of virile passion in his writing. (301)

For Borges, Mother and her standards were represented by the hereditary sword of honor, the sword that comes between him and the beloved, the sword of family history and lore. Estela was a mutt, without patrician stock of any kind, and had a
vague sense of morals and rectitude. Cilicia was too independent and loose. And María was almost forty years Borges’s junior. All of these women were contrary to what the ever image-conscious Leonor had in mind for her Georgie.

The last point of correspondence between these three women was that, without exception, they all inspired or collaborated with Borges on projects that were connected to Old Norse. María, of course, is credited with helping Borges on LGM. She was more than his amanuenses; from their trip to various parts of Scandinavia together, she helped reengage Borges with Old Norse texts. Cecilia brought Borges into contact with her sister Delia with whom he wrote ALG. And Estela Canto was, in some ways, his Teodelina Villar. After his first break with Estela, Borges, in fairly short order, wrote “El Zahir.” The location where the fictional Borges finds the coin that enraptures (except, of course, for the point in the story where he rewrites the story of Fafnir and Sigurd) his every waking moment was the corner of Chile and Tacuarí: the very corner on which Estela lived. Borges’s Zahir was Estela, and the only reprieve from that monomania was Scandinavian myth.

Connections and Summary

In 1952, a year after the publication of ALG, Borges published the book of essays Otras Inquisiciones (Other Inquiries or Other Inquisitions). Buried in the middle of the collection is a seemingly innocuous piece entitled “Kafka y Sus Precursors” (“Kafka and His Precursors”); in its printed, octavo-sized page, it comes in at little more than two and a half pages.
The essay begins with a basic query: Who are the precursors to Kafka? Is there a development in literary history where he comes as the natural next step in the order of things? Is there a point where the questions that were being asked could only be answered by Kafka or someone like him? The answer for Borges is as always quite original: Kafka, he says, is in a way his own precursor. He says that after reading material from diverse literatures and periods he found that he was recognizing Kafka's voice throughout. He gives four examples: Zeno, the pre-Socratic philosopher; Han Yu, a prose writer of ninth-century China; Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish theologian and philosopher; and Robert Browning, a nineteenth-century English poet and playwright. He ends the short essay by saying,

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is what is most significant. Kafka's idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist.… The word “precursor” is indispensable to the vocabulary of criticism, but one must try to purify it from any connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. In this correlation, the identity or plurality of men doesn’t matter. (365)

In other words, the impact that Kafka made on literature was such that it not only re-charted the course of literature for the future, but also affected the literature of the past: Zeno took on the power of distortion that was Kafka; the Unicorns of
Han Yu disorient like Kafka; Kierkegaard destabilizes and locates the individual at the center as did Kafka; and like Kafka, Browning problematizes the position of man before God. To put it differently, in terms of adaptation, Kafka, the sense of the Kafkaesque, was adapted by the past.

Here Borges’s words can just as easily be applied to what takes place in ALG and LGM. His conceptualization of the past, of the literature of the past, is uniquely Borgesian. The Old-Germanic, the Old-English, and the Old-Norse texts are interesting and worth discussion because on the one hand they are firmly situated in a time and a place (you have the sense they are the work of a historian) and on the other hand their dream-like quality disorients, two qualities that are often attributed to Borges’s literature.

This latter quality, however, the sense of the dream-like, the sense of the solipsistic was one to which, at different points in his career, Borges’s commitment wavered. He would often lament his inability to write a straightforward narrative, i.e. he often felt insecure by the inwardness and privileging of the individual conscience in his stories.

This is perhaps one of the best explanations for what at first gave rise to ALG and then what engendered the revisions in LGM. When Borges wrote ALG with Delia Ingenieros in 1951 he was at an especially low point. In addition to the embarrassment that came by way of his employment, and at times lack thereof, he had endured intense personal rejections from both Estela Canto (twice) and Cecilia Ingenieros. Indeed, it seemed very much like he was getting no response from others, and that all he had was inwardness and inconsistencies. At this point, the Germanic texts seemed like ideal material for giving voice to these
anxieties: they seemed situated in external reality, but in truth they existed “todo queda incomunicado y sin rastro, como si acontecieran en un sueño” (LGM 144) [in isolation and without a trace, as if it all happened in a dream]. For this, his earlier anthology and history of Germanic texts (ALG) emphasizes first the modesty of his project and second the dream-like, contingent quality of the texts themselves.

Over the fourteen years between ALG and LGM, however, Borges’s fortune changed almost completely. His promotion to the director of the National Library, his appointment to the chair of English literature at the University of Buenos Aires, his reception of the International Publishers’ Prize and subsequent translations and publications of his work abroad, and his relationship with María Vazquez all marked a type of collective response: his voice had gone out, and now it was finally getting a reply. Of all of the relationships that he had had from Estela to María, it was only with María that he announced an engagement (see Bioy 1001–27). Consequently, when he updates the text with María his focus is on the situatedness and non-contingent nature of the Medieval Germanic texts: he adds examples that fix them in a given point and adjusts his interpretations such that his analysis is not simultaneously commentary on the text and on general ontological issues but of just the text (see above examples in comparison section on runic inscriptions and analysis of Njal’s Saga). Even though the general content doesn’t change, he becomes more strident and confident in its claims to scholarship, claims that were not considered justified by specialists6. Indeed, they

6 In the review of the Norwegian translation Mattias Tveitane says, “Som en orientering for et spansk publikum om en fremmed og fjern litteratur har den
may not have been justified as revelatory for specialists on Scandinavia, but are
certainly so for specialists on Borges.

In summary, in these two books Borges was picking the precursors that
from one book to the next align with different aspects of Borges’s life and output.
The first work, ALG, highlights Borges sense of isolation and inwardness; one of
the major trademarks for Borges’s work. The second work, LGM, emphasizes the
certainty of time and place: at a time when Borges wanted that aspect of the
Medieval Germanic texts to be his precursors.

Poetry and Prose
“Ragnarök”
In the March-April issue of the 1959 volume of Sur Borges published a very
unusual work of poetic prose entitled “Ragnarök.” The work starts out with this
brief exposition on the nature of dreams, “En los sueños (escribe Coleridge) las
imágenes figuran las impresiones que pensamos que causan” (Selected Poems
90) [“In Dreams (Coleridge writes), images take the shape of the effects we
believe they cause” (Selected Poems 91)]. By that, he goes on to explain, he means
that the nightmare images found in dreams are not the cause of our terror, but
the result of real-life horror. From there he describes one of his recent
nightmares.

The scene of the nightmare was a faculty meeting at the University of
Buenos Aires. In the middle of the meeting the faculty was assailed by cries from
muligens sin verdi ... dermod tåler den knapt å presenters på norsk” (qtd. in Margrét
Jónsdóttir 141) [For the Spanish public, it could be useful as an introduction to a
little-known, foreign literature ... but its publication is not justified for a Norwegian
audience].
people of one of the poorer barrios of the city who were heralding the arrival of the gods to the college. Of those many gods that entered the hall of the college of humanities a few broke loose from the throng and presented themselves in the front. The faculty and those who had arrived with the gods cheered and wept as those took their places on the stage, for, after centuries’ absence, they had finally returned. They marched around on the stage soaking in the homage the people paid with a sense of haughty disdain, and at last, at a point of sheer exultation and triumph, one of the gods spoke, but instead of speaking, sounded “incrediblemente agrio, con algo de gárgara y de silbido” (90) [“(with) incredibly harsh clacking, complete with gargles and whistles” (91)]. The gods, having lived like animals in exile from humanity, had lost their speech. The years of abuse from Christianity and Islam had been merciless and, “Frentes muy bajas, dentaduras amarillas, bigotes ralos de mulato o de chino y belfos bestiales publicaban la degeneración de la estirpe olímpica” (90) [“The decadence of the Olympic bloodline was evident in their beetling brows, yellowed teeth, patchy half-breed or Chinese whiskers, and bestial protruding lips” (91)]. Those in attendance saw the daggers hid in the tattered suits of the gods and sensed that here they were playing their last card. They also saw that they “nos dejábamos ganar por el miedo o la lástima, acabarían de destruirnos” (90) [“would destroy us if we allowed ourselves to be swayed by fear [or] pity” (91)]. The faculty removed their revolvers, and quickly and cheerfully dispatched the gods.

Williamson summarizes his analysis of this very unusual prose poem thus:

In “Ragnarök,” Borges was expressing his dismay at the Revolución Libertadora’s failure to bring about “democratic regeneration”: He had to
accept that Perón had destroyed everything he had ever believed in or hoped for. And given that the people persisted in supporting Perón, they were now perceived as a threat; he had to destroy them before they destroyed the values he held dear.... Estela Canto had been proved right—the only alternative to making a deal with Perón was to accept military violence. Nevertheless, There is something perverse in [that] image of Borges ‘happily’ firing on a horde of savages pouring out of strange, dark, forbidden places in the lower depths of El Bajo. If there was any joy in the massacre, it was a kind of mad, self-punishing glee, for in writing “Ragnarök,” Borges, as Estela had predicted, was siding with Mother—he was grabbing the sword of honor but using it, finally, to cut out his heart.

(340)

After the June sixteenth bombing on the Plaza de Mayo, and after several years of hardship from failed leadership, Juan Perón was finally ousted from power. He lived in exile—mainly in Spain and Venezuela—for eighteen years and during that time he continued to manipulate the Argentine public stage in such a way that any hope that the initial coup had at reforming Argentine life, was stymied. Borges, a supporter of the coup and a zealous opponent of Perón, initially celebrated the results of Perón’s exile: i.e. Democracy and greater transparency. But as he saw those of the lower class continually give way to the Perón propaganda machine, he lost faith in the first of those outcomes. The people of the poorer barrio support the gods that had been exiled (Perón) and, when in full view, it was clear that there was no categorical assurance that such gods would
never again appear except by totalitarian solidity, the type of political force that Borges would eventually go on to support.

Accordingly, Williamson’s interpretation is not without merit; indeed, it seems quite logical considering the circumstances. But in comments to Adolfo Casares, it was an interpretation that Borges resisted. After acknowledging that it is the role of the critic to ascribe meaning to a text, he provides the exception as it concerns this particular story: “pueda ser lo que es: un sueño, y como sueño, vagamente simbólico…. mi cuento es meramente un sueño, tal como lo soñé.” (Casares 480) [it can be that which it is: a dream, and as a dream vaguely symbolic…. my story is no more than a dream, such as I dreamed it]. A typical contradiction of Borges.

The truth is, though, that as Borges intimates in the first paragraph of the story, dreams and the horrors found therein are not without antecedents. Consequently, it is not wholly inappropriate to seek meaning behind the representation, and, on that front, perhaps the best place to start is with the title.

In that same conversation with Adolfo Casares, at least as reported by Casares, Borges had this to say of the title:

*Ragnarök* significa *crepúsculo de los dioses*. Una vez acordado ese título, me pareció que era casi necesario; ahora, si lo ponía en español, revelaba el secreto; si lo ponía en francés, en inglés o en alemán, también lo revelaba y resultaba además un poco caprichoso, y que la expresión no estaba en el original, sino traducida, y no al español, sino a un tercer idioma. Tal vez sea un poco absurdo ese título misterioso, pero sirve para lo que quiero: decir *crepúsculo de lo dioses* y guardar el secreto. (480)
(Ragnarök means twilight of the gods. Once the title was determined, it seemed to me almost necessary; for if I had put it in Spanish, the secret would have been revealed; if I put it in French, in English, or in German, it would likewise have been revealed and moreover it would have seemed capricious that the expression wasn’t in the original, but rather in translation, and that it wasn’t even in Spanish, but a third language. Perhaps this mysterious title seems a little absurd, but for me it serves the purpose: to say twilight of the gods and also keep the secret.)

This, taken with Borges’s earlier comments, suggests that at the very least he was playing with the idea and process of interpretation. For this poem, the meaning was not meant to be effortlessly deduced, and, to that end, an effective way to obscure and enrich it was by way of Norse Mythology.

The concept of Ragnarök is rich and, to a certain degree, complex. It is most fully and clearly articulated in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, specifically at the end of the section entitled Gylfaginning. Gylfi, in disguise as Gangleri, asks the three high kings, all of whom are Odin, the nature of Ragnarök. High, the lowest of the three kings, responds first by describing the events that immediately precede it: there will be three years of unimaginable war, brothers against brothers and fathers against sons; following that, three years of uninterrupted winter; after these six years of war and winter, the wolves will swallow the sun and moon, Fenriswolf will break loose and bring great and fiery destruction, this destruction will cause the sea to surge and thus loose the Midgard Serpent, which will spray untold amounts of venom; with Fenriswolf and Midgard Serpent causing havoc, the frost giants, led by Hrym on the boat made of the fingernails
of the dead, cross the bridge, Bifrost, to Asgard and break it from their immense weight. While all of this happens, Heimdall, the sentry of Asgard, will blow his horn to wake up the gods and alert them of the onset of Ragnarök.

Odin will immediately go to Mimir’s Well to seek counsel on how to proceed, and evidently will be told by Mimir to lead the charge against the frost giants, Fenriswolf, and the Midgard Serpent. Each god will be matched up against his historic nemesis: Odin against Fenriswolf, Thor against the Midgard Serpent, Heimdall against Loki (a very complicated character), and Frey against Surt (another leader of the Frost Giants). Ultimately, the great battle will end with the gods winning, but only by a small margin: Thor will kill the Midgard Serpent but only after having ingested venom, which will cause his death, Heimdall and Loki will cause each other’s demise (the details are not clear), and Odin is swallowed by Fenriswolf who will then have his jaw ripped off by Vidar, Odin’s son.

After Ragnarök, of the great Norse pantheon, only six gods will survive the fire and destruction: Odin’s Vidar and Vali, Thor’s Modi and Magni, and Baldr and Hod—all will dwell in Idavoll, a place where Asgard previously stood. Eventually the flooding will recede and leave the earth regenerated and beautiful, and two humans (Lif and Leifthrasir) that had hidden in the woods while all of the events of Ragnarök were taking place, will emerge like Adam and Eve as the great progenitors of humanity.

In short, the Nordic Ragnarök came as the culmination of a race, a culmination that had been foretold and anticipated. In it, the gods of Ragnarök fought mightily, and ultimately, albeit significantly diminished and their role altogether altered, came out as victors. These were gods of awe and majesty,
whose twilight was in the end necessary to usher in the dawn of the new era, the 
age of man. Indeed, these events and players strike a stark contrast to the puny, 
pitiable, and desperate gods portrayed in Borges’s “Ragnarök.” Borges’s strong 
reading of the Nordic myth is almost a complete inversion of the original.

Returning, then, to Borges’s comments to Adolfo Casares on the title, 
Borges evoked this sense of passing on, of the twilight of a species by entitling his 
work Ragnarök, but he also evoked the Norse pantheon at their martial best. Had 
Borges simply called it “Twilight of the Gods,” he would have lost the Nordic 
connection, or as he phrased it, that which concealed “the secret.” He would have 
lost the connection that reveals the horror behind the nightmare, the inspiration 
for the vision. Williamson’s interpretation seems to be true: Borges was 
disillusioned by the revolutionaries, and perhaps he did feel that a totalitarian 
response would be an appropriate gesture for decades of Peronist abuse, but the 
greater nuance, the secret comes in its Nordic allusion. In the Nordic Ragnarök, 
the gods win and there winning ushers in an age of rebirth and beauty. Even 
though they have the guns appear in the dream and they so quickly and cheerfully 
dispatch the gods, Borges knew that this plight of Peronism was not going to be 
so easily dismissed. Those that fire on the gods at the end of Borges’s story are 
the educated elite of the college of humanities, those who had never been 
disciples of Perón. The real force of Perón was found outside of such small circles, 
and those were not going to be so easily dispatched.

To summarize, the horror that brought on Borges’s nightmare was not 
simply that the god in exile, Perón, had worked his way back into public 
influence, had reappeared on the stage, but that even by taking the move which
Borges found ethically, morally, and philosophically repugnant (i.e. turning against democracy and supporting enlightened totalitarianism), the gods would still prevail, Perón’s inarticulate clacking and gargles would ultimately regain command and perpetuate the acrid rot of society instead of its regeneration. These gods were a perversion of those portrayed in Snorri’s Ragnarök, but a perversion, much like their model, that would persist. This reading, of course, this secret is available only by recourse to the North. Borges’s intertextual allusion and creative re-reading of the Nordic source, much like the character Borges’s in “El Zahir,” imbues the text with greater significance, in this case, imbues it with the sense of cynical despair.

“Islandia”
By 1977 Borges had been to Iceland twice, first in 1971 and again in 1976. These two trips were for Borges more like pilgrimages, having interacted on a textual level with Iceland since his childhood. As a result of his first visit, he started to study Old Norse in earnest, and would have, in addition to his Old-English readings on Saturday (which he had been doing since the ’50s), regular Old-Norse readings with students, friends, and colleagues from the University. The rigorous effort by Borges to learn Old Norse, and the effort he expended to engage the Old-Norse texts free from mediation, resulted in a veritable flowering of Nordic adaptations and allusions. Among those were the two poems “A Islandia” and “Islandia.”

7 Each poem, along with translation, is found in the appendix.
In Williamson’s estimation the latter poem comes at a climax in Borges’s life (see Williamson 422). Having been forever stymied in his relationships with women, he was at a point when he was finally free of his mother’s oppressive oversight—by this time he was seventy-eight and his mother had previously passed away two years before—and was now able to be with a woman (María Kodoma), and feel the joy that comes from such an amorous relationship; Williamson’s assertion is that Iceland, thus, became the emblem of that victory. Such an interpretation seems to be the case, but Williamson’s method of arriving at this conclusion seems to come without his fully appreciating the literary gestures that most strongly suggest it, and without culling the meaning from the differences between the two poems.

Just after ending his brief and troubled marriage with Elsa Astete Millán in 1970, Borges wrote an autobiographical essay to accompany his and Norman Thomas di Giovanni’s translation of *El Aleph* published later that same year. With this turbulent time in Borges’s life in mind, it is surprising how Borges concludes the essay. It reads:

> In a way, youthfulness seems closer to me today than when I was a young man. I no longer regard happiness as unattainable; once, long ago, I did. Now I know that it may occur at any moment but that it should never be sought after.... What I’m out for now is peace, the enjoyment of thinking and of friendship, and, though it may be too ambitious, a sense of loving and of being loved. (260)

This uncharacteristic optimism seems to come from his association with and courting of María Kodoma.
María first met Borges when she was twelve. Her father took her to a lecture Borges gave, and afterwards she and Borges discussed her favorite book, *Alice in Wonderland*. It was not until some time later, however, when she was attending the university, that their relationship fully developed. María was taking Borges’s class on the epic and feeling overwhelmed by the material sought his advice. From that meeting forward, she was a regular member of Borges’s inner circle of students and friends. Even as Borges was struggling with his marriage, with the demands of his mother, the demands of his publishers, and the expectations of his readership, Borges found solace in María’s quiet, confident, and reassuring spirit. In addition to being quite attracted to her physically, Borges was drawn in by her depth and her apparent indifference to his fame.

Once formally separated from Elsa, Borges began travelling with María, and the first, of a long list of places they visited, was Iceland. There Borges worked up enough courage to reveal the extent of his affections for María, and to his great satisfaction, and perhaps surprise, she responded that the feelings were mutual. Borges later went on to say that this experience in Iceland acted as “the greatest revelation of [his] life” (Alifano 127). Borges and María were together almost constantly after that, and this relationship with María would go on to be his most enduring relationship with a woman.

While together, Borges and María traveled to the United States, various parts of Europe, Asia, throughout South America, and multiple times to Iceland. After their first trip there in 1971 they returned in 1976. In between those two years many things occurred. In 1973, Juan Perón returned to power; in July of 1975, at ninety-nine years of age, Leonor Acevedo, his mother, passed away; and
in September of that same year Borges made his first offer of matrimony to María. According to subsequent interviews, this proposal put María in a difficult position. Having been the child of divorced parents and also out of great fear for her independence, she early on made a commitment never to marry. For her, she had declared her love to Borges and that was sufficient. These events form the backdrop to these two poems.

Thematically, “A Islandia,” is, typical to Borges, Borgescentric. He celebrates the beauty, wonder, and history of Iceland, but frames it with notes of melancholic reflection. The focus is the Iceland of old: the Iceland of myth, the Iceland of the Vikings, the Iceland of Old Norse; the focus is on the Borges of the past and the aged Borges of the present: Borges as a child receiving a book from his father, Borges as a withered, blind, old man crawling through the texts of his childhood with slow, plodding reference to the dictionary. He ends, however, positively as the penultimate line ends in an ellipsis to be followed by a single concluding line that holds out hope for affection. Clearly everything mentioned earlier in the poem was Borges’s bygone image of Iceland, and now it symbolizes the glimmering prospect of, as he phrases it in the autobiographical essay, “a sense of loving and being loved” (476).

His later poem, “Islandia,” takes up many of these earlier thematic considerations: Iceland, where the Germanic myths were preserved; Iceland, of the motionless afternoon sun; and Iceland of the sea. One of the major thematic differences, however, is the complete absence of Borges. Where the first poem reminisces with tenderness and melancholy and only offers a late glimmer of hope, this subsequent poem is pure celebration. The intimated desire for an
enduring love in the earlier poem provided the one moment of authentic expression of his inner self, but now, having been with María for six years and having experienced the depth of her commitment, Borges is able to write in a way that is “not mere nostalgia” but a celebration of the present. He is at last finding satisfaction in the imminent.

Beyond the thematic and personal elements that make these poems interesting, one of the most interesting characteristics comes as an absence. While Borges seems to gesture towards the form of the kenning with his opening lines of the two poems, especially “Islandia,” they are nevertheless so conspicuously absent that they are nearly present. In other words, in the regular interviews given by Borges on Iceland, on Old Norse texts, and on Scandinavia in general, Borges had a standard litany of images and motifs that he would reference (e.g., Odin offering sacrifice to himself, the boat of fingernails, the early manifestation of the novel, etc.) and most prominent, indeed often the first among them, was the kenning. So, in a text dedicated to the country in which they were the most diligently conserved, it is very unusual that they would be missing.

This lack of kennings, especially in “Islandia,” combined with the images evoked in the poem of the mythological figure Baldr, of the wolves that usher in the night and day, of the personified memory of Germany, and the incongruities between the Vikings and the modern Icelander, all evince an apotheosis of Borges’s literary effect. As shown in the following section on The Prose Edda, Borges adapts his personality, in “Islandia” it appears he is adapting the entire breadth and length of Icelandic culture when in fact he is appropriating only
those aspects of Norse culture—in isolation, separated from their context—that most strongly resonate with the Borgesian conceits, and, as the consummate irony, with the most prominent symbol of Nordic literature (made prominent in Hispanidad in part due to his patronage), the kenning, the literary device that he would later say best symbolizes his early, modern sensibilities, he leaves it out. A gesture that marks, in a way, a separation from those earlier, as perceived by Borges, failures. His early life was filled with disappointment and heartache, and now with María, he was ready to make a break.

Translation

Prose Edda
In the years following the publication of these two poems and the publication of Borges’s translation of the first section of Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda, a great deal happened in Borges’s public and private life. Having backed General Videla as an alternative to Perón puppet democracy, he was now having serious misgivings. The Dirty War, from around 1976 to 1983, which resulted in the death or “disappearance” of at least 20,000 people, the war over the Maldives/Falkland Islands, and an overwhelming degree of nationalism, eventually led Borges to reconsider his position and once again endorse democracy.

His relationship with María continued in happiness. Borges’s attempts to convince her to marry him to satisfy his Victorian inclinations became something of a joke between the two of them; she persisted in her resolve to remain together by simple, verbal commitment. They also traveled extensively as Borges’s fame
called him to various sides of the planet to receive honorary doctorates and other awards.

By 1984, Borges was recognized internationally as the father of postmodernism and, to be sure, one of the greatest contemporary authors of the time. Borges had become many different things to many different people including the genial host of Medieval Germanic literature to the Spanish-speaking world. With his 1951 treatment of Antiguas Literaturas Germánicas, which was the first work published in Spanish that focused on Old Germanic literature at length and his earlier, 1933, lengthy description of the Nordic kenning, which was also the first description of its kind for Spanish speakers, Borges had become a key intermediary for medieval Germanic literature for all of Hispanidad.

So, by 1984, after having studied Old English for over thirty years and Old Norse for more than ten and having written numerous introductory works and various translations, Borges decided to attempt translating what for many is the cornerstone of Old Norse literature, the first section of The Prose Edda, “Gylfaginning.” ⁸ In “Gylfaginning,” the Swedish king Gylfi essentially stumbles upon the hall of the gods, Valhalla. While there, the gods execute an elaborate display of allusions and tricks intended to confuse and disorient Gylfi. The delusions are undertaken by the gods at the expense of Gylfi, hence “Gylfaginning,” i.e. “the deluding of Gylfi.”

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⁸ In Sigrún Ástríður Eiríksdóttir’s essay describing the Icelandic subtext in Borges’s short stories, she uses Gylfaginning as a model to describe Borges’s prosaic method. She finds the role of the narrator in the Icelandic text as the model for that of Borges’s texts. I think she is certainly on the right track in some of the other conclusions in this article, here, however, I think she extends the connection too far.
Borges’s title to his translation, however, is *La alucinación de Gylfí* (The Hallucination of Gylfí), a title that changes the source of the illusion. Of this change, Efraín Kristal says,

Borges’s choice of “Halucination” erases the divine flavor of the title, which underscores the Gods’ ability to deceive mortals. A substitution of the notion of “Hallucination” for that of “deception” provided an orientation for the meaning of Borges’s translation. In his version the gods have produced a hallucination for Gylfí, but they themselves may be a hallucination. Borges is shifting an action perpetrated by the gods into a personal experience partially induced by the gods. (80)

This shift of focus is a particularly Borgesian conceit. He takes what in the text comes as an outward influence on Gylfí and makes it one that finds its origin in Gylfí himself. It is a dream for which Gylfí is responsible. Not too unlike what happens in “The Circular Ruins” or “El Aleph,” where the key to the mystery is a personal one.

Further prototypical Borgesian moments of course abound as the work progresses. For instance, the penultimate section of the work, section 54, can be closely translated:

Því næst heyrði Gangleri dyni mikla hvern veg frá sér ok leit út á hlið sér. Ok þá er hann sést meir um, þá stendr hann úti á sléttum velli, sér þá enga höll ok enga borg. Gengr hann þá leið sína braut ok kemr heim í ríki sitt ok segir þau tíðendi, er hann hefir sét ík heyrt, ok eftir honum sagði hverr maðr öðrum þessar sögur.
Next Gangleri heard loud noises coming at him from all directions. He looked to one side and, when he looked back again, he was standing outside on a level plain, where he saw neither the hall nor the fortress. He left and traveled back home to his kingdom, where he told of the events that he had seen and what he had heard. And after him, people passed these stories down from on to the other. (Byock 78)

Borges’s version reads:

Gangleri oyó a su alrededor mucho ruido y al mirar vio que estaba a la intemperie en campo abierto y no había ni sala ni castillo. Entonces prosiguió caminando y volvió a su reino y contó esas cosas que había visto y oído, y después de él los hombres siguieron contándolas. (104)

Gangleri heard loud noises all around him and when he looked he saw he was outdoors in open air and there was neither hall nor castle. Then he proceeded walking and returned to his kingdom and he told those things he had seen and heard, and after him people continued telling them.

(Kristal 81)

The first, nearer the original, translation makes it seem that by legerdemain, as Gylfi looks to the left that the Gods are able to realize the completion of their illusion; Borges doesn’t include this look, and thus, by omission, further enhances the sense of hallucination and dreamscape.

But in terms of omissions, the most notable comes in Borges’s complete erasure of section fifty-five. There the gods come together after having spent the previous fifty-four sections weaving an elaborate deceit and decide what changes they would need to make so that in the future when the stories are being told by
the decedents of Gylfi, there is outside evidence to corroborate them. And while the textual authenticity of this passage is doubted among Scandinavian scholars, as Borges’s approach and his emphasis on the solipsistic perspective has here been framed, it is perfectly clear that regardless of the section’s authenticity, Borges would not—could not—include such a, in a way, dogmatic confirmation of external verification.

“Gylfaginning,” then, is a text that, from the perspective of a twentieth century reader, seems quite Borgesian. It is filled with deceit, trickery, and subterfuge and seems to privilege mere appearance over reality, indeed, if ever there were a text that prefigures Borges, this is it. Consequently, when translated by Borges, it moves from being a pseudo- or proto-Borgesian text to an overtly Borgesian one. That is to say, Borges adapts the text through and to his own literary orientation.

**Summary**
Starting from his childhood encounter with the *Völsunga Saga*, to his works of literary criticism on the kenning and Germanic medieval texts in general, to his various Scandinavian poems and essays, and ending with his, in the words of Efraín Kristal, “culminating” (79) work and translation *La alucinación de Gylfí*, it is clear, from this survey, that Borges’s engagement with Scandinavian history and especially its texts was sustained and intimate. For Borges, his interest in the North was not a passing whim, but rather a constant source of inspiration and
allegory: He not only had thematic literary sympathies, but, as the profusion of biographical details elucidate, saw parallels and patterns to his own life.

This survey is incomplete, however, as the genre for which Borges is most well known, the short story, has yet to be addressed. Their absence is not to suggest that they are exceptional, that so many other facets of his work were influenced by the North, but not his short stories. Starting from his early stories in *Historia Universal de la Infamia*, to *Ficciones*, *El Aleph*, *El Hacedor*, *El informe de Brodie*, and even his last collection of short stories *Veinticinco agosto 1983 y otros cuentos*, Borges alludes to, interweaves, and rewrites Nordic myth and literature. Indeed, just as the Borges of “El Zahir” reworked Fafnir and Sigurd’s story, so too are the stories of “La Intrusa,” “El Disco,” “El Espejo y la máscara,” etc. strong readings of myths, sagas, folk literature. For some of the stories in these collections, the reference is complete and sustained, whereas in others the reference is little more than a cameo that adds to the stories complexity and obscurity. Of all of Borges’s collections, *El Libro de Arena* has the most references to Scandinavia, and of those, the two stories most deeply rooted in the area are “Undr” and “Ulrica.”
Chapter 3

“He perdido la cuenta de mis libros. Quizá todos son prescindibles; si tuviera que elegir dos, optaría por El libro de arena y por Historia de la noche” (Borges, “El Taller” 358)

(I’ve lost count of my books. Perhaps all are redundant; if I had to choose two, I would opt for The Book of Sand and History of the Night”)

“Mi mejor libro... [es] El Libro de Arena.”

(Borges, “Así escribo” 30)

(My best book... [is] The Book of Sand.)

Introduction
In both instances, the epigraphs come from workshops that Borges gave on his mode of composition. In each of those workshops, as he works through his process, he comments on the merits of his work. In Borges’s estimation, his early work was convoluted and obsessed with novelty, and it is not until his later work, that he finds straightforward narrative. In the prologue to El Informe de Brodie (published just before El Libro de Arena) he writes: “He renunciado a las sorpresas de un estilo barroco... durante muchos años creí que me será dado alcanzar una buena página mediante variaciones y novedades; ahora, cumplidos los setenta, creo haber encontrado mi voz” (OC 2:400) [I have renounced the surprises of baroque style... for many years I believed that I would achieve good
work through variation and novelty; now, at seventy, I believe I've found my voice]. Herbert J. Brant reads this as Borges, in preparation for his death, attempting to “make sense out of what had previously appeared impenetrable, or... [to make] a new unity” (73).

As covered by the survey, Borges largely felt his younger sensibilities aligned with the decadence of the skalds, as best symbolized in their complex rules and obscure kennings. It can be said, then, that later in life, his model was the saga. In commenting on “La Intrusa,” Borges said that it was “the first of my new ventures into straightforward storytelling. From this beginning I went on to write many others” (*The Aleph* 279). And commenting on that same story while in Iceland he said, “Þegar ég skrifaði hana, reyndi ég að ganga eins hreint til verks og höfundar Íslendiga sagna. Ég hafði þær að fyrirmynd” (Johannessen 221) [when I wrote it, I tried to proceed as the authors of the Icelandic sagas. I had them as examples].

In this chapter the focus will now be on Borges’s short stories. In all of his collections, from *Historia Universal de la Infamia* to his last publication of stories, *Atlas*, there are references and even sustained re-workings of Nordic texts. As in the survey, the focus here will only be on those stories that most openly signal their connection to old Scandinavian material. The two texts that will be examined at length both come from the same collection: *El Libro de Arena* (*Book of Sand*). Of the thirteen stories published in that collection, six of the stories (“El disco,” “El soborno,” “Undr,” “El espejo y la máscara,” “La noche de los dones,” and “Ulrica”) center on Nordic myth and history. The two sections in this chapter will give detailed explication of “Undr” and “Ulrica.” To reiterate,
the argument is that Borges used the Nordic works as source material for strong readings, strong readings that endow the text with a sense of the Borgesian; Borgesian, moreover, insofar as it reflects the Borges of the moment. For the texts treated in the survey there was relatively little secondary material: ALG and LGM had only briefly been discussed in Margrét Jónsdóttir’s article; “Islandia” and “A Islandia” had no formal treatment; “Ragnarök” was analyzed at some length in Williamson’s biography; and Borges’s translation of “Gylfaginning” was only seriously treated in Efraín Kristal’s work on Borges and translation. For the texts that follow, however, there has been greater critical attention. Thus, each article’s section will begin with a brief sketch of the story, followed by a review of the relevant secondary material, and then conclude with close readings similar to those in the survey.

“Undr”
“Undr” begins with an introductory paragraph that frames the narrative. According to the introduction, the narrative could be an extract from Adam of Bremen’s Libellus, which had been missing for centuries and only found recently by Lappenberg in the Bodleian library. What follows is a translation of that work by Borges that “no es literal, pero ... digna de fe” (48) [“is not literal, but ... is faithful” (59)].

The story proper begins with a description of a people known as Urns. They live within the lowlands of the Wisla river valley and, unlike their neighbors to the north, are Christian. They are a warrior people and “debido a la inclemencia de la guerras casi no aran la tierra” (48) [“the severity of their wars
almost entirely prevents them from tilling their lands.” 59]. After this brief description of the Urns, he, presumably Adam of Bremen, recounts his conversation with Ulf Sigurdarson.

After their obligatory exchange in Latin, as they both are clergymen, they speak in Old Norse, and Ulf recounts the story of his interaction with the Urns. He said that as a skald he had a natural affinity for their language and culture as it was rumored they had achieved the ultimate economy of expression in their poetics of the single word. When he arrives, after much effort, to their land, he is treated with indifference and enmity. He fortunately finds refuge with a smith, named Orm, who conveys the history and nature of the people and their king, named Gunnlaug. According to Orm, Gunnlaug greatly mistrusts foreigners such that he often crucifies them. Ulf, after hearing this, decides to compose a *drápa* in the king’s honor, and as soon as he commits it to memory, two men from the king come to retrieve him and take him to the hall of the king. On their way there, Ulf sees three different colored posts, with something different mounted on each: first, a yellow post topped with a black fish; second, a red post topped with a disk; third, a black post with a symbol Ulf could no longer remember. After passing these three posts, Ulf is taken into the presence of the king, who appears to be suffering from a great sickness, and who is laying atop a bed that looks like a dais.

Ulf repeats his *drápa* for the king, is given a silver ring for his efforts, and pushed aside as room is made for an Urn court poet. His poem brings hush and rapture, even tears as the audience absorbs it. Ulf recalls hearing someone describe the poem “*Ahora no quiere decir nada*” (50) [“Now, meaningless” (62)]. When the poet finishes, everyone disperses. As Ulf walks off, he’s stopped by
someone who says his name is Bjarni Thorkelsson. Bjarni tells Ulf that they come from common stock and as such feels compelled to warn Ulf that now he has heard the word, he will be put to death. Bjarni offers to help Ulf escape, and just before Ulf escapes, he asks Bjarni to reveal to him the word that he supposedly heard. Bjarni demurs and says “nadie puede enseñar nada” (50) [“no one can teach another anything” (62)]. Once they part, Ulf says that he spent many winters of adventure fleeing the Urn king; in that retreat he played many parts and experienced many things: slave merchant, slave, cantor, assayer of deep waters; loved and was loved, dueled, and fought in many battles. Ulf said, “En el curso del tiempo he sido muchos, pero ese torbellino fue un largo sueño” (50) [“In the course of time I have been many men, but that whirlwind of events was one long dream” (63)]. Over all of that time, however, he continued to wonder about the word, and, while sitting on the banks of a river that widened into the sea, he believed that he finally knew what it was.

To be vindicated in his revelation he returned to the land of the Urns to find Thorkelsson. Once he found Thorkelsson, he realized how much the two of them had aged. Ulf asks after the king, and is told by Bjarni that Gunnlaug is no longer the king and that “Ahora es otro su nombre” (51) [“Now his name is other” (63)]. Ulf quickly, in order to get to the matter at hand, describes his journeys since they last saw each other, and then is interrupted by Bjarni, who quite surprisingly asks “¿Qué te dio la primera mujer que tuviste?” [“What were you given by the first woman you slept with?” (64)]. To which Ulf responds “Todo” (51) [“Everything” (64)]. Upon hearing this Bjarni reveals the word. The final paragraph reads:
Dijo la palabra Undr, que quiere decir maravilla. 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. Tomé el arpa y canté con una palabra distinta. “Está bien” dijo el otro y tuve que acercarme para oírlo. “Me has entendido.” (51)

He spoke the word Undr, which means wonder. I was overwhelmed by the song of the man who lay dying, but 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, the cold dawns, the northern lights over the water, the oars. I took up the harp and sang—a different word. “Hmm,” said the poet, and I had to draw close to hear him. “You have understood me.” (64)

Review of Secondary Material

The first critic who treats “Undr” at greatest length is Sigrún Astríður Eiríksdóttir in her article entitled “Icelandic Sagas and Archetypes in Jorge Luis Borges’s ‘Undr.’” In Sigrún’s estimation, “Undr’ is arguably Borges’ most closely glossed and extended reference to the Old Icelandic literary sources” (315). Her argument progresses by making contrasts and connections, principally between Christianity and paganism: the Urns are Christian, and even quite uniquely believers in the consubstantiality of the three parts of the trinity as opposed to the Arian concept of Christ’s inferiority to the Father, but yet they still use the runic alphabet, a writing system steeped in lore and magical pagan powers (see 317); to put a finer point on this observation (one that Sigrún misses), once they were converted to
Christianity they would have acquired the Latin alphabet, the script of the church. For her, the most important contrast comes in the figures latently, and sometimes expressly, invoked throughout the story: Odin and Christ. When Ulf is being taken to the king, he sees the three posts each holding a different symbol. According to Sigrún, the fish represents Christianity and the red post and its disc represent Odin and paganism. After identifying the symbols, she observes, “Lined up starkly beside the fish of Christianity, the heathen sign of Odin’s disk seems to be endowed with exactly the same importance,” and then asks “Is this the eternal recurrence in which Christ has replaced Odin, effecting only cosmetic and not fundamental changes to the process which has always been taking place?” (322) The questions are clearly articulated and the process appears sound, but the obvious mistake is the order in which she has Ulf encounter each stake: red stake and disk then black stake and fish, when in fact, the correct order is first the fish, or in her assessment Christianity, then the disk or paganism. In light of her later conclusions, the distinction is not unimportant. Of those two figures, Odin and Christ, and their relationship with expression, with the word or words, she uses the kenning (representing Odin, the god of poetry and expression) and the skalds employment of it as the primary literary trope in contrast to the single word (representing Christ, the Word made flesh) of the Urns. She says, “Kennings can ... be multiple or layered, when an additional word is made to qualify a basic kenning another step beyond the object it denotes ... [i.e.] since the raven is a ‘gull of hate,’ then the warrior responsible for the corpses on which the raven feeds becomes a ‘nourisher of gulls of hate’” (328). With that in mind, she goes on to summarize, where the “single word of the Urnos [is reductive] ... the kenning
can be thought of as ‘expansive’ in its tendency to multiply the relationships between objects or events” (328). Said differently, and more explicitly connected to the figures in question, Christ represents the summary or apex of all expression, in a sense he is the culmination of all words; and in contrast, Odin represents the proliferation of words, from him all expression originates. The following diagram shows this flow of expression for the two figures:

![Diagram showing the flow of expression from Odin to Christ](image)

In the brief history of the Urns, as told by Bjarni, this transition from the poetics of Odin to the poetics of Christ is clear. When Bjarni goes to rescue Ulf he says, of the kennings, that “Recuerdo haber oído esas figuras al padre de mi padre” (50) “I remember hearing those tropes from my father’s father” (62). “Thus in the generation of Thorkelsson’s grandfather there existed what we understand as traditional poetry [of Odin], but in the interim it has given way to the poetry of the word [of Christ]” (Stewart 59).

Returning to those three posts, Sigrún’s contention that the ethics of Christ supplants that of Odin seems to rely on historical accounts, and in a way the history of the Urns, rather that what Borges conveys. The order of the posts is first Christ, then Odin. The movement suggests eschewing the economy of the single word for its veritable frenzy. Understanding these two signposts in that way helps clarify both the ending and the third signpost. Starting with the third signpost, Ulf says “vi un poste pintado de negro, con un dibujo que he olvidado”
This forgetfulness, in Sigrún’s mind, suggests that as of yet it is not entirely clear what will replace Christ, or the single Word. The ending however, provides perhaps a more likely meaning for the third post. When Bjarni finally reveals for him that the word is “Undr” (Wonder), Ulf’s response is a reflection on his life, the events of his quest, and then a song, whose only distinctive quality lies in its difference. This latter fact, and the circumstances from which it was borne, for Bjarni represent Ulf’s comprehension of the third post: meaning without recourse to any metaphysical system (words without claim to transcendent signification), but rather difference (in the Derridean sense) as the crucial component that bestows meaning.

In other words, true to Sigrún’s analysis, the historical evolution has been cyclical: from paganism (multiplicity), to Christianity (unity), to paganism (multiplicity). But the next phase, instead of relying on, or making claims to any system beyond the situatedness of being, will be one of contingency: meaning only coming from the difference of one perspective to an other, a perspective that is fixed in a given space and time, in a given person. This analysis is consistant with Jon Stewart’s examination of “Undr” in his article “Idealism in Two Stories from The Book of Sand.”

The two stories in Stewart’s study are “Undr” and the story that immediately precedes it in the collection, “El Espejo y la máscara” (“The Mirror and the Mask”). The nub of his argument is that “the two stories present ... a literary argument for idealism” (51). In the concluding paragraph of his section on “Undr,” he writes, “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 [the story] there is a revelation caused by a poem which consists in ... a single word.... the movement is from plurality to singularity” (61). The singularity, contrary to what Stewart asserts, however, is not the singularity of the Word, but that of the given individual, for, just as Sigrún ignores the poet’s last assertion that Ulf understood him by virtue of difference, so too does Stewart. With that omission, he goes on to state, somewhat dogmatically, “no one can teach [Ulf] Sigurdsson knowledge of the Word; he must discover the meaning of the word ‘wonder’ in the wonders of his own life” (63). From there, though, he parts quite inexplicably from this appeal to noumenal recognition on the part of the protagonist, to an interpretation more consonant with difference and particularity: “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.”

Apart from Sigrún and Stewart, two other critics, in the context of their analysis of El Libro de Arena as a whole, briefly analyze “Undr.” The first, already mentioned, Herbert Brant, believes the works all symbolize Borges’s preparation for his death. Brant says, “The preparation for death, announcing the ending point for earthly life, is the goal of the final stage of physical existence. Part of this preparation is effected by means of dreams” (75). He then goes on to say, in connection with Jung’s concept of individuation, that “the process of individuation that has been expressed in the works of Jorge Luis Borges can be understood as a process that attempts to join the divided psyche into a unified whole in preparation for the end of the physical stage of life” (75), and the form of
this dream process that prepares the dreamer for death usually has these characteristics:

1) the presence of a guide which usually takes the form of a particularly wise female or of the “personal ‘other’ half of the soul of the dying individual”; 2) an intruder who puts the dreamer in danger; 3) situations which provide compensation for the missed opportunities of youth; and 4) an exploration or discovery of objects that represent the after-life. (76)

This model proves particularly useful in analyzing “Undr” as it not only corresponds to what Borges may in fact be undergoing personally, but also dramatizes the process in its protagonist Ulf. For Ulf, “Ese torbellino [la vida] fue un largo sueño” (50) [“the whirlwind of events [life] was one long dream” (63)]. More will be said on this momentarily.

The fourth critic that treats “Undr” is Franca Mariani in her “Los incipit de El Libro de Arena.” The core of her essay is that, “el incipit puede estimular el interés del lector crítico por constituir un segmento narrativo privilegiado en el que, a veces, se puede captar la esencia misma del texto” (89) [the incipit can stimulate the critical reader’s interest in how a privileged segment of the narrative can embody the essence of the whole], and that, “La importancia del incipit como lugar en el que se inicia la relación autor/lector puede resultar a veces un juego abierto, simulación escrita de una relación real” (89) [the importance of the incipit, as place in which the relationship between the author and the reader begins, can turn out to be an open game, a written simulation of a real relationship]. In short, her point is somewhat banal: first impressions are often the lasting ones. It is important, however, to understand these gestures in
“Undr,” with its immediate appeal to the reader, informing her that what follows is a translation of a recently found manuscript, as gestures by Borges to, from the beginning, create a relationship of ironic distance.

Explication

Before looking at the way this fits into the context of Borges’s life, a closer look at some of the allusions, beyond what has already been mentioned in the review of literature, is important to understand how this story works within the framework of this thesis.

The first reference of note in the framing paragraph is to the 1615 edition of Adam of Bremen’s *Libellus* that was found in the Bodleian library by Lappenberg and published in his *Analecta Germanica* in 1894. Adam of Bremen was the historian for the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen, which included the whole Nordic region until the middle of the twelfth century. His *Gesta*, of which the *Libellus* formed the fourth chapter, was written between 1073 and 1076 AD and primarily reported the missionary efforts in the North. By the time he was writing, some of the areas within the archdiocese had been Christian and under Christian rule for almost a century. The 1615 edition of the work, according to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to which Borges was particularly devoted, was the first complete printing of the *Gesta*. It was also the first time it had been printed in Sweden, Uppsala to be precise, which is symbolically important because, as Borges in “Undr” points out, Uppsala was the last stronghold of pagan worship. The Lappenberg mentioned is most assuredly Johann Martin Lappenberg, who in 1846 did indeed publish his edition of the
Gesta. He died in 1865 long before his supposed republication of just the Libellus in 1894. The reference to 1894 Leipzig is likely a reference to one of the most famous chess matches of all time between Theodor von Scheve and Siegbert Tarrasch. If in fact this reference to Leipzig of 1894 is to the chess match, which would give some explanation to the chessboard laid out next to the king Gunnlaug when Ulf met him. King Gunnlaug and the smith Orm seem to reference the skald of that name in the family saga entitled Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu (The Story of Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue).

Of all of the family sagas, none are more literary, in both theme and composition, than Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu. Gunnlaug is a poet that has received a vow that when he returns from his Viking trips he will have the hand of the woman with whom he spent his youth playing chess, and who also happened to be the most beautiful person in Iceland’s history: Helga Thorsteinsdóttir. The one condition, however, is that he return to Iceland after three years abroad otherwise the agreement is null. While abroad, he goes from one court to the next earning kings’ respect and patronage by his superlative poetry. For the king of Sweden, Norway, England, and Denmark he composes skaldic poetry, and each rewards him handsomely. When visiting the Swedish king, though, he runs into competition. Having arrived before Gunnlaug, Raven, another poet, feels he already has the ear of the king, and thus begins a poetic turf war: each side volleys back and forth one poem after another, each touting their skills. Eventually the king placates them by saying they both can be his poets. Neither one is happy with the arrangement and eventually decide to part ways. Raven goes back to Iceland and Gunnlaug back to his voyages; he’s eventually detained
for some time in England during its war with Denmark: he is too essential to King
Ethelred. Once Raven gets back to Iceland and while he’s attending the Thing, he
approaches Helga’s father, Thorsteinn. Raven reminds him that the three years
have passed and that he no longer has any obligation to Gunnlaug. Thorsteinn is
conflicted because he doesn’t want bad blood with Gunnlaug, and, truthfully,
feels Gunnlaug would make a better match. Before long, however, Raven’s
purposes are achieved and he and Helga are married.

Once Gunnlaug returns, several duels—both of words and weapons—ensue
between the two men. With every battle of weapons comes an equally intense
battle of verse; they’re not only testing their military mettle, but also their verbal
acuity. Eventually, it ends in something of a stalemate: Gunnlaug chops off
Raven’s leg and then runs him through with his sword, but only after Raven takes
a cheap shot that wounds Gunnlaug fatally.

The connections between this story and “Undr” are notable: a traveling
Icelandic skald is led by a man named Orm to perform for a foreign king named
Gunnlaug; once he performs, he is succeeded by a rival poet; the subject of the
conflict between the two poets (in both stories, their claims to authority over the
word) eventually leads to both of their deaths.

As for biographical connections, in the chronology of Borges’s
publications, the story “Undr” comes between writing “A Islandia” and
“Islandia.” Borges’s mother died the same year of its publication, he had been
with María for over five years, and the literary significance of his work was now
beyond question. He had already been to Iceland once and because of that trip
had become ever more engaged with Icelandic texts in their original language. As
earlier mentioned, this engagement engendered a flowering of Nordic themed poems and stories, principally in his work *El Libro de Arena*. In discussing that book Matthías Johannessen reports, in his collection of interviews, “Nú vinnur hann að sex eða sjö smásögum, sem eiga ad koma út í bók á næsta ári. [Borges sagði] “Ekki fantasíur eins og fyrri sögur mínar, heldur knappar, einfaldar og blátt áfram.”” (224) [He now works on six or seven short stories, which should be published next year. [Borges said,] “They are not like the fantasies of my earlier stories, rather they are concise, simple, and straightforward”]. In other words, they are saga-like.

**Conclusion**

The complexity of what is happening in this story can, in a way, becomes clear in Borges’s final remarks in that interview with Matthías Johannessen. Johannessen asks if there is any link between what happens in works of fiction to what happens in real life. Borges responds:

> Ég ímynda mér, að lestur bóka geti orðið eins og hver önnur reynsla í lifinu, hvað eigum við að segja: að verda ástfanginn; upplifa dauða einhvers? Bók er raunverulegur viðburður í lóifi okkar. Hún er ekki blekking. Enginn veit, hvað lífið er. Kannski er það draumur. En mér er nær að halda, að góð bók sé eins mikilvægur þáttur í draumi okkar og hvað annað. (254)

(I imagine that reading a book can be like any other experience in life, such as falling in love or having someone you know die. A book is a real experience in our life. It is not mere deception. No one knows what life is.)
Perhaps it’s a dream. To me it comes as near the point to think that a good book is just as important in our dream as anything else.)

What was intended to be a more straightforward story, devoid of former fantasies, is certainly not lacking in its complexity. The many literary false-leads (e.g., Lappenberg, Adam of Bremen, dividing Gunnlaug Worm-tongue over two characters, etc.) serve as a kind of literary wasteland, to obfuscate possible meaning. Pulling from Sigrún’s and Stewart’s conclusions, the meaning remains contingent, without any transcendent connections. This, in short, is a story of loneliness, isolation, and insecure solipsism. Borges is emotionally at a breaking point, caught between two competing ideologies: Mother and her strict code of ethics and devotion to family honor, and María Kodoma and her promise of love and devotion but on her terms, terms that remain discordant with mother’s. This is Borges at his most unsure. The representation of Borges here takes on particular significance in its contrast to the fate of the Borges character of “Ulrica.”

“Ulrica”
Even for Borges, “Ulrica” is a particularly strange story. Throughout its short three pages, the sense of otherworldliness and dreamscape pervade. Everything asserted is, often within the same sentence, eventually denied. Particular to that, and with special significance to this thesis, the opening line, the epigraph is, “Hann tekr sverthit Gram ok leggr i methal theira bert” (OC 3:17); the line from the Völsunga Saga where Sigurd lays the sword between him and Brynhild; an action, not until the last paragraph, most notably denied.
The narrator of the story is a late middle-aged professor from Columbia visiting York on research. While taking tea at his hotel, he overhears a conversation between two guests: one of the guests, a woman, is being offered a glass of sherry by another. The woman declines, and with flare says, “Soy feminista ... No quiero remedar a los hombres.” (17) [“I’m a feminist ... I have no desire to imitate men.” (12)]. Upon hearing this, the narrator wastes no time in being introduced to this strong woman. His name is Javier Otárola and hers Ulrica, he never did get her last name. After some small talk, they separate. The next morning, Ulrica invites Javier over to breakfast with her, and from then on Javier is in love. They go on a walk, where they hear the far-off howl of a wolf, discuss the swords Ulrica saw at the museum, and in time, begin kissing. Ulrica stops Javier from going further, and tells him he cannot have her until they get to the inn at Thorgate. A condition that Javier wryly observes, “Para un hombre célibe entrado en años, el ofrecido amor es un don que ya no se espera. El milagro tiene derecho a imponer condiciones” (18) [“For a celibate, middle-aged man, proffered love is a gift that one no longer hopes for; a miracle has the right to impose conditions” (14)]. While they continue onto Thorgate, they review with each other their names, and decide since for each the other’s name is too difficult to pronounce, they will refer to one another as Sigurd and Brunhild, and, to ensure the reference is fully comprehended, Javier says to Ulrica, presumably because she was walking slowly: “Brynhild, caminas como si quisieras que entre los dos hubiera una espada en el lecho” (19) [“Brunhild, you are walking as though you wanted a sword to lie between us in our bed” (15)]. When they get to
the inn, and climb the stairs lined with wallpaper that resembles the tapestry patterns of William Morris, they find an empty room. In it:

Ulrica ya se había desvestido. Me llamó por mi verdadero nombre, Javier. Sentí que la nieve arreciaba. Ya no quedaban muebles ni espejos. No había una espada entre los dos. Como la arena se iba el tiempo. Secular en la sombra fluyó el amor y poseí por primera y última vez la imagen de Ulrica. (19)

Ulrikke had already undressed. She called me by my true name, Javier. I sensed that the snow was coming down harder. Now there was no more furniture, no more mirrors. There was no sword between us. Like sand, time sifted away. Ancient in the dimness flowed love, and for the first and last time, I possessed the image of Ulrikke. (16)

Review of Secondary Material

The focus for the majority of the secondary material for this story is its association with the dream. Teodosio Fernández concludes his essay in a way that nicely summarizes this branch of criticism:

Las posibilidades [de la literatura escandinava] culmina en “Ulrica,” ....

Reminiscencias de ese pasado (en particular el aullido del lobo, tan presente en las antiguas literaturas germánicas) enriquecen el enigmático encuentro de Ulrica y Javier Otárola en la ciudad de York, un encuentro que—como el antiguo mundo escandinavo—es como si no hubiera sido, como si transcurriera en un sueño. (94)
The possibilities [of Scandinavian literature] culminates in “Ulrica,” .... references to this past (especially the allusion to the wolf, often present in Medieval Germanic literature) enriches the enigmatic story of Ulrica and Javier Otárola in the city of York, a story that—as Medieval Scandinavia itself—is as if it never were, as if it were a dream.

In other words, the dreamscape is created by and with the Scandinavian allusions. Herbert J. Brant discusses this sense of the dream, as earlier referenced, at great length. In line with the schematic attributed to Jung, he has Ulrica act as the wise female guide in Javier’s process of individuation. This process of individuation for Javier, however, is even more significant as it prefigures his death.

As von Franz points out, the motif of the union of male and female as described in “Ulrica,” frequently symbolized the “death wedding” that has been so universally noted throughout the ages in fairy tales and folk stories. In a sense, the death wedding is a “description of the completed individuation process, of an ultimate union of psychic opposites, a liberation from all egocentricity and an ecstatic entrance into a state of divine wholeness” (45). The union of Javier and Ulrica, the soul guide, is a symbolic declaration of death, when the spirit is set free from the physical world. (77)

Indeed, a death that perhaps prefigures his physical death, but just as likely la petite mort. Borges himself points out in the epilogue, “El tema del amor es harto común en mis versos; no así en mi prosa, que no guarda otro ejemplo que Ulrica” (OC 3:72) [“The subject of love is quite common in my poetry; not so in my prose,
where the only example is “Ulrikke” (94)]. “Ulrica” has the distinction of being Borges’s most sexual story. Javier, the Borges figure, is not at any moment in the work, exactly filled with confidence. He is timid, trusting, and submissive. He has hope, but remains cautious in his conquest. Just as Ulf in “Undr” ends his quest for the culminating word with resignation that his closest approximation will come in the form of difference, so too does Javier feel resigned to accept the conditions of this tryst as the closest he will come to achieving that individuating union.
In an interview with Williamson, María Kodoma said that Borges told her that Ulrica was “meant to represent her” (398). This mysterious female guide that led an aging scholar into death, was what María would be for almost two decades of Borges’s final years. In Williamson’s final comments on the story he says, “‘Ulrica’ [is] about Borges’s liberation from the sword” (399). When Borges was preparing the publication of “Ulrica” journalist Carlos Burone witnessed the process of final revision: “[Borges] would move his head and smile, as if he were spying on his two characters.” (qtd. Williamson 414).

To be sure, María meant a great deal to Borges. Besides his mother, he had never been with a woman for such an extended period of time; moreover, he had never been with a woman that seemed to have as much dedication to him as she to him. While in Iceland on their second visit, he and María had been married, only symbolically as it had no legal effect, by the only pagan priest still practicing (see Williamson 422). It was not until Borges was somewhat older at 87 that this marriage would become legal.

**Borges’s Monument and “Ulrica”**

Borges died in Geneva, Switzerland from cancer on June 14, 1986. He died in self-imposed exile. He was no longer interested in being caught in the political and familial disputes of his home and country. Through some international efforts, he and María finally had their marriage legalized by a Paraguayan court. He died in relative peace.
Of his monument, no one knows, or at least is willing to confess, who designed it; many believe it was done by Borges or María. I’m inclined to believe the latter. The first side of the rough-hewn monument, which is very much in the style of the rune stones found throughout northern Europe, has his name inscribed on the top, and his vital data at the bottom. Between the two, there is an image from the Lindisfarne gravestone, which depicts what is believed to be the first Viking attack on England, and an inscription from the Old English poem “The Battle of Maldon,” which reads, “And ne forhtedon na” [Be not afraid].

The battle of Maldon is one of the most gruesome recordings of a Viking battle. The forces of Byrhtnoth valiantly struggled against the Norsemen. As they prepared to go into battle Byrhtnoth rallied his men, and told them to “And ne
forhtedon na” [Be not afraid] and to stand firm with steady hands. Their forces, though, were eventually overcome; a defeat that led to Viking rule of England for over twenty years. Borges’s love of this poem, was well known. He translated it with María in their weekly readings and upon completing the translation gave her his prized copy.

On the opposing side, the inscription at the top is one that by now has become quite familiar: “Hann tekr sverthtt Gram ok leggri methal their abert.” Following that quote from the Völsunga Saga, comes a standard depiction of a Viking long ship, and beneath the ship, the last inscription reads, “De Ulrica a Javier Otárola.”

This thesis began with a somewhat lengthy exposition of Gramr, the sword that represented the honor of a family: with it their honor had been secured, and
with it their honor was maintained. In the storied history of Argentina, Borges’s family had been at the top; they were part of society’s elect. But eventually they found themselves on the wrong political side and fell from such high esteem. Once fallen from those heights, it became the mission of some and the obsession of others, to return. Leonor Acevedo, Mother, impressed upon her son Georgie that this great burden rested on him, but by the end of her life Mother came to see things differently, Williamson observes:

In her last years, Leonor Acevedo appears to have seen this cult of the ancestors under a different aspect…. She had come to appreciate that she had herself been a victim of the sword of honor, and that it had bee the sword, as it were, that had lain between her and Jorge [Sr.]…. As her life drew to a close, it would appear also that she perceived what it was her son required of her. On one occasion, when Borges asked María Kodoma to read to his bedridden mother, Doña Leonor took Georgie’s hand and then reached out for María’s, and since by that stage she lacked the strength to speak, she could do no more than bring their hands together over her ailing body. (417)

This sword that had been consciously and subconsciously hanging over him for almost eighty years, it had, with this gesture been metaphorically lifted. By him, the Borges name had regained its former glory, and now he would be permitted to have his Brynhild unimpeded.

Symbolically, the flow of inscriptions on Borges’s monument creates two, similar mini-narratives. In a more global sense, the front side depicts the overwhelming power and force of the Vikings, the North men, over the English.
On the back, that same power and force is conveyed but on a more inter-personal level: the self-imposed restrictions and boundaries are overcome by the dream-like strength of a Nordic woman’s will—the symbol of reticence, Sigurd’s sword, is removed by Ulrica. The sense of loneliness and solipsism of “Undr” is overcome by the enduring presence of another. For this, Borges looked on, as Burone observed, with pleasure as he envisioned his introverted scholar being taken in and overcome by his Ulrica, by his María.

**Conclusion**
The Nordic literature was a natural fit. The trickery and illusion of Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, the decadence of the kennings, and the pseudo-history of the sagas, all seemed to prefigure Borges. They were his precursors as he would go on to become theirs.

Borges’s strong reading of Scandinavian texts likewise assumes a dual role. As the survey in chapter two of Borges’s translation, poetry, and criticism and the readings of “Undr” and “Ulrica” in chapter three, have shown, the Scandinavian texts proved particularly malleable to his strong readings. He was able to subvert the tradition in creating new texts, texts that featured his more global, political, and historical concerns and also texts that evinced his greatest personal and familial anxieties.
Works Cited


A Islandia (1971)
De las regiones de la hermosa tierra
Que mi carne y su sombra han fatigado
Eres la más remota y la más íntima,
Última Thule, Islandia de las naves,
Del terco arado y del constante remo,
De las tendidas redes marineras,
De esa curiosa luz de tarde inmóvil
Que efunde el vago cielo desde el alba
Y del viento que busca los perdidos
Velámenes del viking. Tierra sacra
Que fuiste la memoria de Germania
Y rescataste su mitología de una selva de hierro y de su lobo
Y de la nave que los dioses temen,
Labrada con las uñas de los muertos.
Islandia, te he soñado largamente
Desde aquella mañana en que mi padre
Le dio al niño que he sido y que no ha muerto
Una versión de la Völsunga Saga
Que ahora está descifrando mi penumbra
Con la ayuda del lento diccionario.
Cuando el cuerpo se cansa de su hombre,
Cuando el fuego declina y ya es ceniza,
Bien está el resignado aprendizaje
De una empresa infinita; yo he elegido
El de tu lengua, ese latín del Norte
Que abarcó las estepas y los mares
De un hemisferio y resonó en Bizancio
Y en las márgenes vírgenes de América.
Sé que no la sabré, pero me esperan
Los eventuales dones de la busca,
No el fruto sabiamente inalcanzable.
Lo mismo sentirán quienes indagan
Los astros o la serie de los números ...
Sólo el amor, el ignorante amor, Islandia.

(To Iceland
Of the beautiful regions of the earth / that my flesh and its shadow have
tired out / you are the most remote and intimate, / Ultima Thule, Iceland
of the vessels / of the stubborn plough and of the constant oar / of the shy
sea nets / of the curious light of the motionless afternoon / that effuses the
idle heavens from dawn / and of the wind that seeks the lost / sails of the
Vikings. Sacred earth / you were the memory of Germania / and you
rescued the mythology / from a jungle of iron and from the wolf / and
from the boat that the gods fear, / built with the nails of the dead. /
Iceland, I have long dreamed of you / from that long ago morning in which
my father / gave you to the boy I have been, which hasn’t died / a version
of the Völsunga Saga / that is now deciphering my twilight / with the slow help of the dictionary. / When a man’s body tires / when the fire declines to ash, / good is the resignation of learning / an infinite undertaking; I have chosen / your language, this Latin of the North / that covered the flatlands and the seas / of a hemisphere and resounded in Byzantium / and in the virgin peripheries of America. / I know I will not master it, but I hope for / the potential gifts of the search, / not the fruit wisely inaccessible. / Similarly feel those that study / the stars or numerical series... / Only love, unsophisticated love, Iceland.)

Islandia (1976)
Qué dicha par todos los hombres,
Islandia de los mares, que existas.
Islandia de la nieve silenciosa y del agua ferviente.
Islandia de la noche que se aboveda sobre la vigilia y el sueño.
Isla del día blanco que regresa,
joven y mortal como Baldr.
Fría rosa, isla secreta
que fuiste la memoria de Germania y salvaste para nosotros su apagada, enterrada mitología
el anillo que engendra nueve anillos,
los altos lobos de la selva de hierro
que devorarán la luna y el sol,
la nave que Alguien o Algo construye
con uñas de los muertos.
Islandia de los cráteres que esperan,
y de las tranquilas majadas.
Islandia de las tardes inmóviles
y de los hombres fuertes
que son ahora marineros y barqueros y párrcos
y que ayer descubrieron un continente.
Isla de los caballos de larga crin
que engendran sobre el pasto y la lava,
isla del agua llena de monedas
y de no saciada esperanza.
Islandia de la espada y de la runa,
Islandia de la gran memoria cóncava
que no es una nostalgia.
(How fortunate for all men, / Iceland of the seas, that you exist. / Iceland of the silent snow and of the fervent water. / Iceland of the night that vaults / over wakefulness and dreams. / Island of the white day that returns / young and mortal like Baldr. / Cold rose, secret island / you were the memory for Germania / and you saved for us / its humble, buried mythology, / the ring that generates nine rings, / the high wolves of the iron jungle / that devour the moon and the sun, / the ship that Someone or Something built / with the nails of the dead. / Iceland of the waiting
craters, / and of the tranquil corrals. / Iceland of the motionless
afternoons / and of strong men / that are now sailors, boatmen, and
parsons / and that yesterday discovered a continent. / Island of the horses
of long manes / that reproduce on the grass and lava, / island of the water
full of coins / and of unsated hope. / Island of the sword and of the runes,
/ Island of the great concave memory / that is not merely nostalgia)