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Shades of Borges:
The Construction of Identity
in “The Mirror and The Mask”

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The Honors Program
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by
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In the story of “The Mirror and the Mask,” the king of Ireland commissions the bard of his court to compose a poem commemorating Ireland’s recent victory over Norway in the Battle of Clontarf. “The greatest deeds lose their luster if they are not coined in words,” the king [says], ‘I want you to sing my praise. I will be Aeneas; you will be my Virgil.”

The king’s initial statement, “the greatest deeds lose their luster if they are not coined in words,” indicates that discourse has a representational function and provides the justification necessary for the king to commission a work that will construct his immortality. In the case of the Battle of Clontarf, the function of discourse is to describe the battle and preserve its memory as an event in the channels of history, much like preserving a laboratory specimen in a bottle of formaldehyde. The king’s second statement, however, “I want you to sing my praise,” removes the cap from the bottle, revealing the stink of the first statement and unmasking the previously hidden motivations that it attempts to conceal. The king is not interested in the historical preservation of the Battle of Clontarf, nor does he necessarily want to be praised in laudatory poetry; rather, the king is primarily concerned with the immortalization of his identity. The considerations of history and the prospect of praise become secondary when compared to the motivation expressed when the king says, “I will be Aeneas, you will be my Virgil.” Virgil’s Aeneid is not merely the historical description of a series of events, nor is it simply a laudatory poem; it constructs a discursive image of Aeneas. The discursive image is a particular identity and individual history constructed by the text and subsequently attributed to a specific character within a story or constructed upon the body of a “real” person. The king desires a fate similar to Aeneas—to have an identity preserved whole and intact in the formaldehyde of discourse, like that laboratory specimen in a bottle. As if to confirm the motivation

1“The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 75.
behind his statements, or perhaps to provide the bard with a tantalizing motivation for the composition of the commemorative ode, the king concludes by asking the poet, "Do you think yourself capable of this task, which will make us both immortal?"\textsuperscript{2}

The process of the formation, construction, and preservation of identity plays a prevalent role in "The Mirror and the Mask." The characters therein are very concerned about establishing and maintaining their respective identities not only within the confines of the story but also outside the boundaries of the text. Analyzing the formation, construction, and preservation of identity within the story in light of theories, terminologies, and methodologies presented by Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault reveals that identity is a formation of language and a construction of discourse. In just a few short pages, "The Mirror and the Mask" demonstrates the aspects of these theories that relate to the process of the formation, construction, and preservation of identity.

After the king orders the bard to compose a work commemorating the Battle of Clontarf and states the requirements of the discourse, the poet immediately provides an impressive résumé of his literary training, reassuring the king that he is both capable of meeting the requirements and worthy of the honor afforded by the request.

I am Ollan. For twelve winters I have trained in the disciplines of prosody. I know by heart the three hundred and sixty legends that form the basis of true poetry. The cycles of Ulster and Munster are in the strings of my harp. The laws authorize me to be lavish in using the oldest words of our tongue and the most complex metaphors. I have mastered the secret of writing, which protects our art from the common herd. I can celebrate loves, cattle thieves, voyages, and wars. I know the mythological lineages of all the royal houses of Ireland. I possess a knowledge of judicial

\textsuperscript{2}"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 75.
astrology, mathematics, canon law, and the powers of plants. I have
defeated my rivals in public contest. I have made myself skilled in satire,
which causes infirmities of the skin. I know how to yield a sword, as I
proved in your battle. I am ignorant of only one thing—how to thank you
for the gift you make me.3

The bard declaims his résumé of experience not only to reassure the king of his
literary skills, but also to begin the construction of an identity both within and outside
of the context of the story. The vita begins by immediately stating, “I am Ollan,”
providing the poet’s proper name as a base upon which to construct the rest of his
identity. The proper name of the bard “has other than indicative functions: more
than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a
description.”4 The proper name “Ollan” is a signifier, referring to what is signified,
the character of the bard. The term “bard” is of course another signifier, a generic and
archetypal shorthand that provides a general description of Ollan’s function within the
confines of the story. The description of the poet’s literary training not only constructs
an identity for the reader upon the proper name “Ollan,” but it also delineates the
specific function of the bard in the story. Except for the bard’s description of himself
and limited additional information derived from textual observation, the reader is not
provided with any other basis for constructing the identity of the poet.

The identity constructed from the bard’s description of his literary training is
highly dependent upon the accuracy of representation. If representation does not
function as the equal exchange of sign for signified, if the sign is a distortion of the
signified, then the premise of representation has yielded to that of simulation. Rep-

3“The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 75–76.
4“What Is an Author?” FR. Page 105.
other hand, is treacherous and deceitful. In Baudrillard’s arguments supporting the
ascension of simulation over representation, he states that “representation starts from
the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent.” The premise of representation
requires that the description of the bard and the reality of the poet be the same, but
under simulation, the equivalence of sign and reality is blurred and becomes inconse-
quential, and the description is merely another reflection of a simulation. Baudrillard
identifies four “successive phases of the image” in the transition from the merely
representational sign to the sign which only exists as pure simulacrum.

These would be the successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

The four “successive phases of the image” provide the methodology and terminol-
yogy necessary to analyze in the story the effects of the “transition from signs which
dissimulate that there is something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing.”
The poet’s description of himself functions as the first site for the examination of the
differences between mere representation and pure simulation within the story. The
poet’s résumé might accurately represent the reality of the bard and constitute “the
reflection of a basic reality.” If, however, the poet exaggerates his literary training
in an attempt to impress the king, if the description of the bard is an inaccurate
reflection of the reality of the poet, then “it masks and perverts a basic reality.”

But perhaps the reality of the poet is inconsequential or simply does not exist; if his

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5 “Simulacra and Simulations.” SW. Page 170.
7 “Simulacra and Simulations.” SW. Page 170.
8 “Simulacra and Simulations.” SW. Page 170.
identity is simply a discursive formation, then the description of the bard "masks the absence of a basic reality" and becomes the construction of an identity on a proper name. The fourth phase of the image, that the description of the bard "bears no relation to any reality whatever ... [and] is its own pure simulacrum" requires the existence of the sign by itself, as a pure sign, without the benefit of a referential signified.

Although the proper name of the bard, Ollan, seems to signify the description of the poet's image, under closer scrutiny, the relationship between the name of the author and the name of the individual entity who acts as poet becomes more complex than the premise of either mere representation or pure simulation.

The proper name and the author's name are situated between the two poles of description and designation: they must have a certain link with what they name, but one that is neither entirely in the mode of designation nor in that of description; it must be a specific link. However ... the links between the proper name and the individual named and between the author's name and what it names are not isomorphic and do not function in the same way.9

The function of the term "Ollan" as the proper name of an individual who produces discourse is both different from and intertwined with its function as the name of the bard. The proper name functions as a designation, a means of societal identification in social interaction, and identifies a person as an individual by the differentiation between the name of the individual and other designations. It also functions as a sign, signifying a mode of societal interaction, a set of behavioral patterns and characteristics, what might be called personality traits, that form the basis for the

9 "What Is an Author?" FR. Page 106.
construction of an individual identity. The name of the author, however, functions as a part of a larger association, the process of identifying and linking disparate discourses with an author's name, constructing similarities and differences between them, creating discursive distinctions, and establishing a Foucauldian œuvre.

I believe there is another principle of rarefaction, complementary to the first: the author. Not, of course, the author in the sense of the individual who delivered the speech or wrote the text in question, but the author as the unifying principle in a particular group of writings or statements, lying at the origins of their significance, as the seat of their coherence ... We ask authors to answer for the unity of the works published in their names; we ask that they reveal, or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work; we ask them to reveal their personal lives, to account for their experiences and the real story that gave birth to their writings. The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality.  

After listening to the poet recite his résumé, "the king, who was easily tired by long speeches, especially those of others," nevertheless responds with a small diatribe of his own, granting the bard a year for the completion of the commemorative poem. The construction of the king's identity in the court is dependent upon his functioning in an active, speaking capacity instead of fulfilling a passive, listening role. When the king speaks, the court, which occupies a position very similar to that of the reader, pays attention to his words, constructing an identity upon the source of the verbalization, the king's body, reinforcing the identity of the king within the text as the product of discourse. When the king listens to the poet, however, the attention

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10 "The Discourse on Language." AK&DL. Page 221–222.
11 "The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 76.
of the court shifts to the new source of discourse, removing the focus of the court from the king and temporarily halting the construction of his identity; the court then begins to construct an identity on the body of the new speaker, until once again its attention returns to the king.

When the year came round—it had been a time of epidemics and uprisings—the poet presented his panegyric. He declaimed it slowly, confidently, without a glance at the manuscript. With his head the king showed his approval. Everyone imitated his gesture, even those thronging the doorways, who were unable to make out a single word.\textsuperscript{12}

The first poem was commissioned for production as a description of the Battle of Clontarf, preserving forever in the formaldehyde of discourse the memory of the battle and the valor of the king. Because the story provides neither the actual text of the ode nor a description of its contents, leaving the reader with those “thronging the doorways,” the immediate reaction of the king and his subsequent laudatory speech constitute the only criteria for constructing the significance of the poem. The duplication of the king’s gesture of approval marks in the story the beginning of the transition from mere representation to pure simulation. The opening description of the bard’s literary training constitutes the only example of mere representation within the story, but like the subsequently produced odes of the poet, it also corresponds to one of the phases of the image—“it is the reflection of [the] basic reality” of the poet. After the duplication of his demonstration of approval, the king praises the efforts of the bard and provides the poet and the court, as well as the reader, with a critical but positive review of the work.

You have given each word its true meaning, and each substantive the

\textsuperscript{12}"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 76.
epithet given it by the poets of old. In your whole panegyric there is not a single image unknown to the classics. War is the beautiful web of men, and blood is the sword’s water. The sea has its gods and the clouds foretell the future. You have skillfully handled rhyme, alliteration, assonance, quantities, the artifices of learned rhetoric, the wise variation of meters. If all the literature of Ireland were to perish—absit omen—it could be reconstructed from your classic ode. Thirty scribes shall copy it twelve times each.\textsuperscript{13}

Judging from the king’s description, the reader may assume that the poem is of immense proportions, a gigantic culmination and representation of the poet’s literary talents, perhaps something on the order of either the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. The ode itself appears to be an immense reduplication of standard metaphors and traditional mythologies propagated by “the poets of old,” containing “not an image unknown to the classics.” Despite tradition, the metaphors of war as “the beautiful web of men” and blood as “the sword’s water” are nothing more than unimaginative repetition; the mythologies of sea gods and “the clouds foretell[ing] the future” present nothing original. The language and style of the poem reduplicate the traditional modalities of “rhyme, alliteration, assonance, quantities, the artifices of learned rhetoric, [and] the wise variation of meters,” the standard qualities of grammar and writing, but nothing new is introduced—it is all reduplication. The first ode “is the reflection of [the] basic reality” of the description of the poet’s mythological, metaphorical, poetical, and etymological training. The bard’s poem is composed of so much reduplication of everything already written that “if all the literature of Ireland were to perish . . . it could be reconstructed without loss from [the poet’s] classic ode.” Indeed, later in the story, the king reaffirms this statement, saying that “[the] first ode I could

\textsuperscript{13}“The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 76–77.
declare [to be] an apt compendium of all that has been sung in Ireland.”\textsuperscript{14} The king’s final declaration, that “thirty scribes shall copy [the first poem] twelve times each,” ensures that the traditional metaphors and standardized mythologies presented in the ode will be reduplicated three-hundred and sixty times, precisely the number of degrees in a Euclidean circle, and exactly the number of “legends that form the basis of true poetry.”

There was a silence, and then [the king] went on. “All is well and yet nothing has happened. In our veins the blood runs no faster. Our hands have not sought the bow. No one has turned pale. No one uttered a battle cry or set his breast against the Vikings. Before a year is out, poet, we shall applaud another ode. As a sign of our approval, take this mirror, which is of silver.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the king praises the compositional aspects of the poem, the statement that “all is well and yet nothing has happened” reflects his disappointment in the effects of the discourse produced by the bard. The ode may very well be a paragon of traditional metaphors, classical images, and literary devices, a compilation of “all the literature of Ireland,” but it functions as nothing more than a description of the Battle of Clontarf, focusing, no doubt, on the king’s role in the victory over Norway. The Battle of Clontarf provided the king with the opportunity to be a hero, to function as a war-time leader and reap the political spoils of conflict—in short, the war created an environment conducive to the construction of the king’s identity. Seeking to preserve the condition of war, the personal and political benefits of battle, and hence his identity, the king commissioned the production of a commemorative poem, but the bard, desiring to demonstrate his superior compositional abilities, created a historical

\textsuperscript{14}“The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 78.
\textsuperscript{15}“The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 77.
discourse that describes the war in an impeccable style and reduplicates literary tradition but cannot recreate the condition of war. The king wishes to preserve certain elements of war that are linguistically indescribable—the confusing conglomeration of battle, the bizarre relations and interactions of power within war; the action, noise, passion, blood, guts, and fury that actually affect the construction of an identity upon a body and cannot be related but must be experienced to be understood. The poem functions as a representational description in a poetic style of the Battle of Clontarf, but it does not, and perhaps cannot, convey the actual experience of war. After the victory and his subsequent removal from the field of battle, an environment conducive to the formation of his identity, the king wishes to continue fighting, to experience the war again, to sense the feeling of raw power in his body—to have the identity of king constructed upon his body. The king wants to experience the simulation of war, but the bard’s ode completely fails his expectations. Instead of recreating the condition of war, the poem functions as nothing more than a historical description of The Battle of Clontarf; the reflective surface of the silver mirror is indicative of the merely representational function of the ode—“it is the reflection of a basic reality,” and after its telling, “all is well and yet nothing has happened.”

The king then orders the bard to compose a second ode that must surpass the first, granting the space of another year for its completion. Once again, the actual text of the poem is not provided, leaving the reader to construct the significance of the poem from a brief narrative describing its reading, a cryptic description of its content, and the judgment of the king.

The stars in the sky went on in their bright course. Once more the nightingale sang in the Saxon forests, and the poet came back with his manuscript, which was shorter than the one before. He did not repeat it from memory, but read it, obviously hesitant, omitting certain passages
as if he did not completely understand them or did not wish to profane them. The ode was strange. It was not a description of the battle—it was the battle. In its warlike chaos there struggled with one another the God that is Three and is One, Ireland’s pagan deities, and those who would wage war hundreds of years later at the beginning of the Elder Edda. The form was no less odd. A singular noun governed a plural verb. The prepositions were alien to common usage. Harshness alternated with sweetness. The metaphors were arbitrary, or so they seemed.\textsuperscript{16}

The second ode is an example of Baudrillard’s second phase of the image; “it masks and perverts [the] basic reality” of the bard’s literary training. The first poem is a literary masterpiece, the product of a superb poetic talent, describing the Battle of Clontarf, an event fixed in linear time and space, reduplicating “all the literature of Ireland.” Unlike its predecessor, the second poem is not merely a description of an event; rather, instead of describing the event, the poem itself has become an event existing within the concepts of linear time and space but not fixed at one specific point by either constraint. The paradigmatic function of language, as established by the first poem, is primarily communicative; it readily lends itself to description, but is not immediately conducive to the production of discursive events—language does not easily transcend mere representation. The second ode, however, circumvents the established paradigm of language, brandishing the struggling conglomeration of deities from multifarious timestreams alongside the frustrating inadequacies and limitations of linguistic expression in the production of a poem that transcends merely representational discourse.

If the function of language is primarily communicative and descriptive, then transcendental discourse is simply a product of bad writing, but the first ode firmly estab-

\textsuperscript{16}“The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 77.
lishes the linguistic qualifications of the bard; the poet is definitely trained to write, and to write well—he is simply incapable of literary incompetence. The transcendental second poem marks the inadequacies and limitations of paradigmatic language and its inability to function in other than a communicative and descriptive capacity. The bard hesitates in his delivery and chooses to read rather than recite the second ode, "omitting certain passages as if he himself did not completely understand them or did not wish to profane them," because the discourse transcends merely representational language; it lies outside the comprehension afforded by the poet's literary training. Indeed, after the presentation of the first poem, the bard states, "I give thanks and I understand,"17 but after the second, the statement changes to the past tense: "I give thanks and I have understood."18 It is precisely the poet's loss of understanding and his lack of knowledge that marks in the story the beginning of the disintegration of the established linguistic paradigm and the transition of language from a merely representational operation to one that produces discursive events.

The transition from discourse that functions in a primarily communicative and descriptive capacity to discourse that exists as an event is neither a simple nor an automatic process. The discursive event is a work that not only transcends the boundaries of merely representational discourse, but also establishes an independent existence within linear time and space that is fixed by neither constraint; most importantly, however, the discursive event constructs a specific identity for itself and functions as a simulation of reality. Foucault identifies four methodological thresholds—the principles of reversal, discontinuity, specificity, and exteriority—that must be crossed before it is possible "to restore to discourse its character as an event."19 The identification of these thresholds provides the methodology necessary to conduct a thorough

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17"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 77.
18"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 78.
analysis of the transition in the story from merely representational discourse to discourse that constructs a specific identity for itself and functions as a simulation of reality—the discursive event.

The principle of reversal demands the re-examination of “the source of discourse, the principles behind its flourishing and continuity” and the recognition, “in those factors which seem to play a positive role, such as the author discipline [and] will to truth,” of “the negative activity of the cutting-out and rarefaction of discourse.” The first poem requires the presence of an identifiable author, in this case Ollan, as a guarantee of its authenticity; it needs the existence of a “will to truth,” a guarantee that the discourse strives to relate the truth about the objects it attempts to describe, as a validation of the accuracy in its representational function. The second poem, however, transcends the paradigmatic requirements of an identifiable author and a “will to truth”—the ode functions as a simulation of war and establishes an independent existence for itself; subsequently, the identity of the author and the “will to truth” become inconsequential and unnecessary to the formation of the poem’s identity.

Next, the principle of discontinuity maintains that “discourse must be treated as a discontinuous activity, its different manifestations sometimes coming together, but just as easily unaware of, or excluding each other.” Each and every discursive event must be able to exist, be produced, and function independently of any other discourse, without the benefit of automatically assumed relationships and connections with other discourses, including those discourses already attributed to the same author. In addition, the second ode, unlike its predecessor, is not a logical progression of sequential events, nor does it follow a recognizable plot structure; its discontinuity is manifested “in the warlike chaos [of the second ode] [where] [struggle] with one an-

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other the God that is Three and is One, Ireland’s pagan deities, and those who would wage war hundreds of years later at the beginning of the Elder Edda."22 Merely representational discourses, such as the first ode, readily lend themselves to the external formation of identity and the construction of relationships with other discourses, but discursive events, like the second ode, establish an independent existence for themselves, influencing not only the formation of their relationships, connections, and significations with other discourses, but also the construction of their own identity.

Third, “the principle of specificity declares that a particular discourse cannot be resolved by a prior system of significations … We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things, or, at least, as a practice we impose upon them.”23 Although it is easy to derive the organizational structure constructed upon the first poem, the second ode, existing as a discursive event unfixed by either linear time or space, defies not only the existence but also the imposition of a similar organizational structure. The application of an external organizational structure to a discursive event removes its character as an event with almost surgical precision and returns the surviving text to the established linguistic paradigm as a merely representational discourse.

Finally, the principle of exteriority “holds that we are not to burrow to the hidden core of discourse, to the heart of the thought or meaning manifested in it; instead, taking the discourse itself, its appearance and its regularity, that we should look for its external conditions of existence, for that which gives rise to the chance series of these events and fixes its limits.”24 Instead of being produced by the bard, like the first poem, the identity of the second ode is the product of a set of conditions that are external to the bard; specifically, the interplay of power and the interaction

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of language within the text. The identity of the discursive event is a formation constructed around and upon the discourse, but it is a construction from *without*, not from within, and the discourse itself has no internal identity—the "hidden core" and inherent "meaning" of the second poem can be nothing more than the effects of constructing an organizational structure upon its surface.

The king exchanged a few words with the men of letters who stood around him, then spoke to the bard. "Your first ode I could declare was an apt compendium of all that has been sung in Ireland," the king said. "This one outdoes, and even makes as nothing, whatever came before it. It astounds, it dazzles, it causes wonderment. The ignorant will be unworthy of it, but not so the learned, the few. An ivory casket will be the resting place of its single copy."\(^{25}\)

The difference between the respective commentaries of the king in response to the first and second poems marks in the story the differences between a merely representational discourse and a discursive event. After the recitation of the first ode, the king directs his commentary toward praising the literary training of the bard and the linguistic and stylistic attributes of the poem, rather than its actual text. The commentary of the king on the second ode, however, is more analytical than laudatory, not focusing on the literary talents of the bard, but instead examining the power effects of the poem on and in relationship to the existence of other discourses. The king's commentary in response to the first ode attributes the literary style of a particular author, in this case Ollan, to a specific discourse, connecting it with the multiple connotations and allusions conveyed by that name; "the author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of a discourse within a

\(^{25}\)"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 78.
society and a culture."\(^{26}\) The second commentary of the king does not attribute the origin of the discourse to any particular author, but instead analyzes the merits of the discourse as a discourse, constructing the discourse as an independently existing entity, apart from any preconceived notion of the author. The king attempts to preserve the originality of the second poem by encapsulating it within an ivory casket, hoping to protect the discourse from physical duplication, but nevertheless threatens to bury it in the literary duplication brought on by his commentary. As Foucauldian theory states,

commentary averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some ways, finalised. The open multiplicity, the fortuitousness, is transferred, by the principle of commentary, from what is liable to be said to the number, the form, the masks and the circumstances of repetition. The novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance.\(^{27}\)

Although the presence of a recognizable author appears to be required for the existence of purely representational discourse, it is precisely the absence of an identifiable author that characterizes a discursive event. "Of course, it would be ridiculous to deny the existence of individuals who write and invent . . . the individual who sits down to write a text . . . resumes the functions of the author,"\(^{28}\) but the function of the author in the production of representational discourse is different from that of a discursive event. Purely representational discourse requires the presence of a readily identifiable author for validating its authenticity, providing a framework upon

\(^{26}\)"What Is an Author?" F.R. Page 107.
\(^{27}\)"The Discourse on Language." AK&DL. Page 221.
\(^{28}\)"The Discourse on Language." AK&DL. Page 222.
which to construct its "hidden meaning," establishing its similarities, differences, and themes; in a discursive event, however, the identity of the author loses its ascendancy, becoming unimportant and inconsequential to the discourse itself. If purely representational discourse either "is the reflection of [the] basic reality" of the author, or "masks and perverts [that] basic reality," then a discursive event would "mask the absence of [the] basic reality" of the author. The first poem, an example of representational discourse, "is the reflection of [the] basic reality" of the bard’s literary training; however, the second ode, representing a discursive event, not only "masks and perverts [that] basic reality," but begins to mask its absence as well. "The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, [sic] marks the decisive turning point"\(^{29}\) in the transition from the production of purely representational discourse to the production of discursive events.

After commenting on the textual advances of the bard’s second poem, the king orders the poet to compose a third ode that surpasses both of its predecessors. "[The king] added with a smile, ‘We are the figures of a fable, and it is good to remember that in fables the number three prevails.’"\(^{30}\) Although the king’s cryptic comment might appear to be nothing more than a textual justification for the inclusion of the third poem, it also indicates the level of awareness and function of the king within the story. Unlike the bard, who provides the reader with a résumé of his literary training, the identity of the king must be constructed directly from his statements and actions as described within the story, not from an encapsulated summary of his kingly talents. The king appears to be aware that he is the figure of a fable, that his identity is nothing more than a discursive formation, but this knowledge enables the king to exercise a certain amount of power both within and over the story. The general progression of the plot and the actions of the characters appear to be influenced, if not

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\(^{29}\)"Simulacra and Simulations." SW. Page 170.

\(^{30}\)"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 78.
directly controlled, by the dictates of the king; at his command, the bard produces three successive poems, which propel the story in a sequential direction, yet the king admits that he is nothing more than the figure of a fable. The bard, perhaps puzzled by the cryptic remark of the king, constructs “the wizard’s three gifts, triads, and the unquestionable Trinity”31 as possible significations for the prevalence of the number three in fables, desperately trying to relate the statement of the king to some paradigmatically established meaning. The king, apparently ignoring or choosing not to respond to the bard, “continue[s], ‘As a token of our approval, take this golden mask.’”32 The concealing surface of the golden mask is indicative of the “successive phases of the image” occupied by the second poem and its function in relationship to the literary training of the bard—it not only “masks and perverts a basic reality,” but “masks the absence of a basic reality” as well. The second poem functions as a transition in the story from merely representational discourse to discourse that “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever [and] is its own pure simulacrum.”

The anniversary came round again. The palace sentries noticed that the poet carried no manuscript. In amazement, the king looked at him; the bard was like another man. Something other than time had furrowed and transformed his features. His eyes seemed to stare into the distance or to be blind. The bard begged to be allowed a few words with the king. The slaves left the chamber.33

The lack of the manuscript and the loss of the poet’s sight mark in the story the differences between the third poem and its two predecessors. Like the second poem, the third ode occupies a position of transition between two “successive phases

31 "The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 78.
32 "The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 78.
33 "The Mirror and the Mask.” BS. Page 78.
of the image," continuing the progression of discursive transformation begun in the earlier poems. If the first ode is a reflection and the second a distortion of the bard's literary skills, then the final ode must function as a transition away from "[masking] the absence of a basic reality;" the third poem begins to "[bear] no relation to any reality whatever [and to be] its own pure simulacrum." The bard's corporeal body, the locus of his identity as a poet and all his literary training, is itself "furrowed and transformed" in the production and subsequent presentation of the third and final ode. Once again, the reader is provided with neither the actual text nor a summary of the third ode, leaving the reader to construct the significance of the poem from a description of the reaction to the ode; however, instead of being herded out of the court with the rest of the audience, the reader remains in the room as a secret and silent witness to the transaction between the king and the bard.

The bard recited the poem. It consisted of a single line.

Not venturing to repeat it aloud, the poet and his king savored it as if it were a secret prayer or a blasphemy. The king was as awestricken and overcome as the bard. The two looked at each other, very pale.†

The single line of the unwritten and unrepeated poem not only stuns the king and the bard into pale silence, but it also initiates a sequence of events that eventually cause the death of the poet and the disenthronement of the king. The first ode may be an example of purely representational discourse, the second of a discursive event, but the third poem defies the existence of representational discourse and surpasses the level of the discursive event, transcending not only the inadequacies and limitations of linguistic expression, but also the very paradigm of language itself. Unlike the previous poems, which are manifested at the physical level of the

†"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 79.
text, the third ode is unseen and wholly transcendental, existing not as any physical manifestation of discourse, but only as the noncorporeal formation of a verbal statement. The first ode is a description of an event fixed in linear time and space, the second is itself an event specifically fixed by neither constraint, but still existing as a point somewhere within time and space; however, the third ode completely surpasses the limitations of paradigmatic language and transcends temporal and spatial bonds.

"The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models"\textsuperscript{35} such as paradigmatical language, tangible physicality, and the bonds of linear time and space. The process for the formation of identity operates in a fashion similar to the production of the real; identity is the product of a variety of external forces—it is the function of perception and the construction of the discursive exchange of sign for signified at the level of language. The loss of identifiable referentials, the lack of definite tangibility, and the inability to classify, define, subjugate, and otherwise comprehend the third poem that silences the king and the bard and threatens to destroy the referentials that construct their respective realities. It is the pale silence of the king and the bard, however, the cessation of interaction, and the subsequent termination of the discursive exchange of sign for signified that results in the dissolution of their individual identities. The final poem changes the face of reality.

When the real is no longer what it used to be ... there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity ... an escalation of the true, of lived experience ... and ... a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential ...\textsuperscript{36}

The king and the bard, silenced by the third ode, faced with the destruction

\textsuperscript{35}"Simulacra and Simulations." SW. Page 167.
\textsuperscript{36}"Simulacra and Simulations." SW. Page 171.
of referentials that construct their respective realities and the dissolution of their respective identities in a sea of unsignified signs, desperately attempt to recall a sign, an experience, or anything that compares favorably with the third poem, but fail all the same. The bard remains silent, but the king, lacking the referentials necessary to make an accurate commentary on the third ode, is forced to compare the single transcendental line of the poem with the mysteries and wonders he encountered as a young adventurer.

"In my youth," said the king, "I sailed toward the sunset. One one island I saw silver hounds that dealt death to golden boars. On another we fed ourselves on the fragrance of magic apples. On a third I saw walls of fire. On the farthest island of all an arched and hanging river cut across the sky and in its waters went fishes and boats."\(^{37}\)

Although the experiences described by the king border on the fantastic and unbelievable, "they do not compare with [the third] poem, which in some way encompasses them all,"\(^{38}\) leaving the king clinging desperately to the remnants of his identity in the midst of a dubious reality, drowning in a sea of unsignified signs. The king's recollection and divulgence of his fantastic adventures as a youth is the last in a series of attempts to establish a permanent historical identity in linear time and space against the disintegration of his reality. After the recitation of the third ode, the king, struggling to maintain some semblance of his identity in a sea of linguistic destruction, assumes a position of authority and asks the bard, "What bewitchery gave [the third poem] to you?"\(^{39}\)

"In the dawn I woke up speaking words I did not at first understand,"

\(^{37}\)"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 79.
\(^{38}\)"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 79.
\(^{39}\)"The Mirror and the Mask." BS. Page 79.
said the bard. “Those words were a poem. I felt I had committed a sin, perhaps one the Holy Ghost does not forgive.”

“The one we two now share,” the king said in a whisper. “The sin of having known Beauty, which is a gift forbidden to men. Now it behooves us to expiate it. I gave you a mirror and a golden mask; here is my third present, which will be my last.”

In the bard’s right hand he placed a dagger.40

The third ode marks in the story the transition “from signs which dissipulate that there is something to signs which dissipulate that there is nothing,” from “the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent . . . [to] the radical negation of the sign as value.” The subsequent devaluation of the sign, the dissipation of the signified, and the loss of the referent result in not only the disintegration of reality, but also the dissolution of identity. The king’s final gift of the dagger is indicative of “the absence of [the] basic reality” not only of the bard, but also of the system for the exchange of sign for signifier; the sign, and indeed the third poem, “[bear] no relation to any reality whatever: [each] is its own pure simulacrum.”

Of the bard, we know that he killed himself upon leaving the palace; of the king, that he is a beggar wandering the length and breadth of Ireland—which was once his kingdom—and that he has never repeated the poem.41

The third ode is indicative of the existence of the transcendental sign, a sign that exists purely as sign, without the representational benefit of either a signified or referent. The process of the formation of identity, a function of perception and the construction of a discursive exchange of sign for signified, cannot function in the

absence of a referential signified, in the presence of the transcendental sign. Nevertheless, if "the real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times," then perhaps identity may be produced in a similar fashion. The transition from the merely representational sign to one that is purely transcendental mirrors a parallel transformation in the process for the formation of identity. The "matrices, memory banks, and command models" for the construction of identity are a part of linguistic operation—identity is a formation constructed by oral and written discourse; it is the product of a discursive exchange of sign for signified. In addition, it is entirely possible to postulate that the production of written discourse results in a nearly permanent and immutable authorial identity, but the construction of individual identity occurs in the fluid elasticity of oral discourse, in the malleable ephemerality of the spoken word.

42 "Simulacra and Simulations." SW. Page 167.
Bibliography


