

Borges reading Jung **Craig E Stephenson**

Several times during his life, Jorge Luis Borges asserted his role as a reader far above that of a writer. "You become great through what you read far more than through what you write", he said. "Let others boast of the pages they have written; I am proud of those I have read" (Borges 1980). His writings, as he himself admitted, are veritable collages of quotations and ideas, many correctly attributed and others apocryphal. But he could be at times secretive about his real sources, and while he readily confessed his debt to many of his favourite writers, others equally dear to him he kept close to his chest and scarcely mentioned in his work in spite of their considerable importance as intellectual and poetic inspiration. Remy de Gourmont, Marcel Schwob, Thorstein Veblen are a few of those secret masters. Another is Carl Gustav Jung.

Borges wrote as he read, making annotations on the title page or the end-paper pages in his small script that he called the handwriting of a dwarf. He seldom commented on the passages that attracted his attention but simply made a note of the page and then a few words on the chosen topic. While serving as Director of the National Library of Argentina, he maintained this same practice with the library books that he consulted and that he later returned to the circulation desk to be reshelved. In 2017, librarians Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez at the National Library of Argentina published *Borges, libros y lecturas*, a rich catalogue of Borges's marginalia and endpaper notes that they discovered in more than 700 books in the national collection. Two of these books were works by Jung in the original German, one additional in English translation, both languages in which Borges was fluent. (In the case of two of these three, there is evidence that these were books he purchased and gave to the library.) In an interview with the poet Seamus Heaney, Borges said, "I have read Jung with great interest but with no conviction. At best he was an imaginative exploratory writer"(Heaney 1982 77). These published notes now make it possible to follow Borges as he reads Jung and finds in books such as *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Psychology and Religion* a literary and idiosyncratic vocabulary with which to map and explore his private cosmology. These reading-notes mirror many of the best-known motifs in Borges's work.

For example, in the endpaper pages of the library's copy of Jung's *Integration of the Personality*¹, Borges notes that on page 313 Jung takes an epigraph from "The Book of Suleika" (in *Goethe's Westöstlicher Diwan*) translated in this English edition of Jung's book as: "The highest bliss on earth shall be/The joys of personality!" This idea appears developed in one of Borges's short texts, "Everything and Nothing", from his collection *Dreamtigers* (Borges 1964a 46-47), in which he portrays an anguishing conflict of personality in Shakespeare who discovers, through the theatre, his ability to be anyone and everyone but who resigns himself toward the end of his life to being no-one, a retired impresario back in a hometown that does not know him. Like Job, he voices a prayer to God, that after being so many men and women he only wants to be himself. And in a

¹ *Borges, libros y lecturas*, Item 235, p. 209: "Endpaper, signature of Borges, Buenos Aires, 1947. Note: <<Sei nur dis Persönlichkeit>> , p. 281. No de Inv:12.295."

whirlwind, God answers, as he did Job, recasting Shakespeare's complaint in a new light: He too is not Himself, and Shakespeare has been one of His dreams, one of his many emanations. Like Job, the playwright's suffering is not resolved but transcended, with the personalities of both God and Shakespeare reconfigured as one and as many.

"Borges and I", another text from the same collection (Borges 1964a 51), is one of Borges' most celebrated pieces. It delineates the tensions between one "Borges" whose function is first characterized as performative like an author's persona, and the other "Borges", the "I" who is identified with the bodily self that exists in the flesh and will one day perish. The tensions between these two "Borges" increase in this second exposition of the question of a divided self. The body-centered "I" resents lending life to the writing author, and yet the writing somehow provides justification for the other "Borges" to continue living, even if the words incline toward falsehoods or the hyperbolic. The "I" notes Spinoza's argument about the finality or telos of all beings: "the stone eternally wants to be a stone, and the tiger a tiger"². What is the end towards which this first personality is moving, with the author "Borges" relentlessly appropriating the life of "I" as material for his work? The "I" feels so much at a loss that he can no longer even identify who is articulating the final sentence: "I do not know which of us has written this page." But the tone here is as much bemused as resigned, as if ironically he finds in this conjoining of "us" that he has surpassed his dividedness and is, in the end, at one, like Jung's uroboric serpent devouring itself.

Borges seems to have found the Uroboros in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*. His notes in the library's German edition of Jung's book confirm the uses he made of Jung's research in his own work³. In *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges made that linkage explicit by citing Jung in several entries. In the one on the Uroboros he notes: "The curious may read further in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*" (Borges and Geurrero 1970 234). And later, in the entry on the Unicorn, he writes, "In his *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), Jung gives a history and an analysis of these symbols" (Borges and Guerrero 1970 230). Earlier, in his now classic essay "Kafka and his Precursors" from *Other Inquisitions*, Borges includes a footnote about unicorns in which he refers the reader to "two curious illustrations" in the last chapter of *Psychology and Alchemy* (Borges 1964b 107). In the entry on the Salamander (Borges and Guerrero 1970 196), Borges gives the

² Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 4.

³ *Borges, libros y lecturas*, Item 236, pp 209-210: "*Psychologie und Alchemie*, Zürich, Rascher Verlag, 1944, p. 696 Note: signature of Borges, Buenos Aires, 1946. Half title page, manuscript notes, quoting from the book: 160, das dunkle Licht...dis schwarze Sonne [the dark light...the black sun]; 313, obscurum per obscurius [to the dark through the dark]; 429, liber, librum aperit [one book opens to another]; 583, And the top of this rock...; 398, der Salamander [the Salamander], Cf. 376; 399, Ouroboris, Schwanzfresser [the tale-eater], Cf. Gering 12, 322, Leisegang, 111, 112, 35, 99, Nefelibal de Martinez Estrada, 29; 672, Drache als Ouroboros [the dragon as Ouroboris] ; 611, the three legged ass, Vide E.Br. VII, 216, Deussen 132; 591 & 592, Des Rhinozoros [the rhinoceros], Cf. Kern 62, Winternitz II, 193, Mauthner II, 368; p.190, 201, des Affe Gottes [the ape of God]; Bi de Inv.: 17.336."

reader the ironic anecdote from Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography, about how at age five Cellini saw a lizard in the fire and was beaten by his father so that the memory would stick. As an annotation in Borges's hand shows, Borges found this anecdote in *Psychology and Alchemy*, translated from the Italian into German by Goethe and referred to by Jung in a footnote. And the entry on the Ass with Three Legs (Borges and Guerrero 1970 35-36) includes a two-paragraph quotation, referenced as taken from the Parsee *Bundahish*, that he also discovered in Jung. The two indented paragraphs beginning "Of the three-legged ass it is said..." are taken verbatim from "The Unicorn in Persia", a section of Jung's essay, "Religious Ideas in Alchemy", in *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung 1968 §535). When Jung quoted these two paragraphs, he identified his source as Edward William West, (trans.), *Pahlavi Texts (Sacred Books of the East, 5.)* Oxford, 1880, pp. 67ff. Borges chose to ignore his source's source.

Borges read in order to write, and the endpaper pages of the library's copy of *Psychology and Alchemy* confirm his practice of the maxim of 'one book opening onto another.' There is actually a note in Borges's hand that marks the moment (in 1946) when Borges discovered that maxim articulated in *Psychology and Alchemy*, where Jung quotes Chapter 8 of the alchemical work *Margarita Preciosa* by Petrus Bonus the Lombard: "*Rhasis dixit: liber enim librum aperit*" ("Rhasis says: a book that opens the book"). Perhaps a short explanation of this passage is in order. Jung was arguing that embedded in alchemical texts were the *modus operandi* for living: not for converting base metals into gold but for transforming the *prima materia* of natural human existing into contra-natural individuated experience. Inspired by Jung, Borges became interested, from a literary point of view, in the contradictions that the alchemists attempted to evoke and hold together. In his short story "The Zahir" (in *The Aleph*), he referred to the alchemists' appreciation of oxymorons such as a "black sun" (Jung 1968 160) to evoke the dual nature of experience, and noted the alchemical method that privileges paradox: "*obscurum per obscurius, ignotum per ignotius*" (Jung 1968 313). In this story that concerns an object that "cannot be forgotten", Borges further mentions the alchemical re-valuing of what is low, the *prima materia*, and the ironic search for what is high or lofty or *spiritus* in what is dismissed as base and material, quoting the thirteenth-century Muslim alchemist Abu al-Qasim Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Iraqi al-Simawi: "And the top of this rock is confused with its base, and its nearest part reaches to its farthest, and its head is in the place of its back, and vice-versa." (Jung 1968 583). The unforgettable form-changing Zahir is the literary resolution of this alchemical paradox.

The subtlety of alchemical metaphors and Jung's psychological commentaries appealed to Borges, though more for aesthetic and literary than for psychological or theological reasons (Heaney 1982 77). Borges noted Jung's text:

"This Nous or spirit was known as 'Mercurius,' and it is to this arcanum that the alchemical saying refers: "Whatever the wise seek is mercury." A very ancient formula, attributed by Zosimos to the legendary Ostanos, runs: 'Go to the waters of the Nile, and there thou wilt find a stone that hath a spirit [pneuma].'" (Jung 1970 §151)

Those spiritual magical waters of the Nile are an important element in the plot of “The Immortal”, a story gathered in *The Aleph*.

In the essay, “Individual Dream Symbolism in Alchemy”, Jung presents a series of dreams recorded by the Nobel-prize-winning quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli, employing details from alchemy in order to elucidate the distressing psychological process that Pauli endured with psychotherapeutic assistance. Jung did not translate the manifest content of a dream backwards in order to unlock its latent sexual significance. His non-Freudian interpretation of dreams interested Borges profoundly, and he marked the passage in *Psychology and Alchemy* in which Jung traces instead a cross-cultural history of symbol and myth to amplify the dream in service of its telos. Here are Jung’s words: “I doubt whether we can assume that a dream is something other than it appears to be. I am rather inclined to quote another Jewish authority, the Talmud, which says: ‘The dream is its own interpretation’” (Jung 1970 §41). In his preface to an anthology of dreams that he compiled in *Libro de sueños*, Borges echoes Jung: “Dreams are the invention of the dreamer” (Borges 1976 7).

Just as important as amplification, Jung found it crucial to contextualize dreams by tracking them in sequence as a creative chain of autonomous psychic events running parallel to outer experience:

“I never, if I can help it, interpret one dream by itself. As a rule a dream belongs in a series. Since there is a continuity of consciousness despite the fact that it is regularly interrupted by sleep, there is probably also a continuity of unconscious processes – perhaps even more than with the events of consciousness. In any case my experience is in favour of the probability that dreams are visible links in a chain of unconscious events. If we want to shed any light on the deeper reasons for the dream, we must go back to the series and find out where it is located in the long chain of four hundred dreams.” (Jung 1968 §53)

So, for example, in one of Pauli’s dreams, Jung appreciates the unexpected appearance of an ape as a healing motif that appears as if to resolve a personal split, as well as a collective chasm, between nature, which Christianity debases and demonizes, and spirit. Borges marked the following passage:

“It is true that in the existing alchemical texts – which with few exceptions belong to the Christian era – the ancient connection between Thoth-Hermes and the ape has disappeared, but it still existed at the time of the Roman Empire. Mercurius, however, had several things in common with the devil – which we will not enter upon here – and so the ape once more crops up in the vicinity of Mercurius as the *simia Dei* (fig, 67).” (Jung 1968 §173)

Similarly Borges writes in the preface to *Libro de sueños*:

“If a tiger were to enter this room, we’d feel afraid; if we feel afraid in a dream, we’d conceive a tiger. This would be the visionary reason for our alarm. I’ve

mentioned a tiger, but because fear precedes the apparition that we have conjured up to understand it, we can project our horror on whatever thing we chose which in our waking hours need not prove horrendous. A marble bust, a cellar, the heads side of a coin, a mirror. There is not a single shape in the entire universe that can not be contaminated with horror.” (Borges 1976 8)

The point is that, in the alchemical realm of Mercurius as a hermetic function that transcends opposites, that reconciles the opposites of light and shadow, the appearance in Pauli’s personal cosmology of the ape ironically evokes the divine. But as the alchemists knew and Jung warns, any experiment to reconcile opposites such as the Christian and the Dionysian can be explosive, and if the retort is not strong enough to hold the tension, the work produces not synthesis or transcendence (the alchemical stone) but horror and more diabolical splitting. Jung tracked this Faustian dilemma enacted in Pauli’s dream series:

“It therefore fits in very well with the purpose of the dream: to attempt a combination of Christian and Dionysian religious ideas. Evidently this is to come about without the one excluding the other, without any values being destroyed. This is extremely important, since the reconstruction of the “gibbon” is to take place in the sacred precincts. Such a sacrilege might easily lead to the dangerous supposition that the leftward movement is a *diabolica fraus* and the gibbon the devil – for the devil is in fact regarded as the “ape of God”. (Jung 1968 §181)

In Pauli’s dream, reconstructing the gibbon is a manifestation of a new creative possibility born out of conflict⁴, and Jung notes the inclination in consciousness to resist or reject the new as inferior or infantile. Jung is suggesting that a new element may not spring fully formed like Athena out of the head of Zeus but manifest as partaking of unconscious instinct, as animal or diminutively homuncular, before one re-cognizes and re-deems it as valuable for consciousness.

Though Borges protested that he read Jung aesthetically and without conviction, it is interesting to see, in the third Jungian volume in the library’s collection, *Psychologie und Religion*⁵, Borges’s marks signaling several passages concerning Jung’s approach to neurosis:

⁴ In Gerard de Nerval’s memoir of his madness, *Aurélia*, it is a winged llama that is being birthed in a purple light. Jung (2015) notes this hopeful image of an animal life principle struggling to revive, following from the dream vision of a winged spirit tragically crashing into the Paris courtyard that presaged Nerval’s psychotic breakdown.

⁵ *Borges, libros y lecturas* Item 237, pp. 212-213: “*Psychologie und Religion* (Terry Lectures, 1937, given at Yale University) (German), Zurich, Rascher Verlag, 1942. Etiquette, Barna Bookstore, Maipú 441, Buenos Aires; signature of Borges, 1947; 48, der Traum seine eigene Deutung sei; 60, Kontinuität der unbewussten Prozesse; 79, - den vorteil, neurotisch zu sein; 98, –deus est figura (cf. Rabelais-Urquhart- II, 340); 101, ... dem kuglerunden doppelgeschlechtlichen Menschen (cf. Gomperz, II, 386); 140, ... dass man von keiner Sünde erlöst werde könne,.... (cf. Leisegang, 263)

“A neurosis is a humiliating defeat and is felt as such by people who are not entirely unconscious of their own psychology.” (Jung 1970 §12)

“He had the *great advantage of being neurotic* and so, whenever he tried to be disloyal to his experience or to deny the voice, the neurotic condition instantly came back.” (Jung 1970 §74)

“The thing that cures a neurosis must be as convincing as the neurosis, and since the latter is only too real, the helpful experience must be equally real. It must be a very real illusion, if you want to put it pessimistically.” (Jung 1970 §167)

Borges was the son of a professor of psychology, an admirer of William James whose theories he expounded to his son at a very early age, and Borges was no doubt familiar with the history of psychopathology. And yet, he is interested in discovering that Jung described neurosis as the *creator* of consciousness, as a regressive defensive splitting or evasiveness that also possesses *in potentia* a progressive *telos*. That is to say, Borges reads (and is struck by the fact) that implicit in a neurosis is its cure. To go back to Borges’s reading of Spinoza, if the *telos* of the tiger is blocked or evaded, can the labour of convincingly trying to evoke a dreamtiger as a ‘convincingly real’ illusion, promote wholeness? Borges notes that Jung says it can.⁶

There is, however, an epistemological problem with assigning truth to any such psychological claim, and again Borges marks a passage in which Jung appends a hesitating qualification:

“The psyche is the object of psychology, and – fatally enough – also its subject. There is no getting away from this fact.” (Jung 1970 §87)

What is most important in all this to witness Borges making playful creative use of passages he finds in Jung. Here, for instance, is a passage on Gnosticism that Borges marked in *Psychology and Religion*:

“Remembering the other Gnostic doctrine that no man can be redeemed from a sin he has not committed, we are here confronted with a problem of the very

91, ... und unglücklicherweise zugleich auch ihr Subjekt; 161, was im Christusleben geschieht, ereignet sich immer und überall; 165, Gehe zu den Strömungen des Nils,...; 189, Das, was eine Neurose heilt,...; 130, Nach Archytas ist die Seele ein Kreis oder eine Kugel. Vide Psychologie und Alchemie 444. Vide Studi Danteschi XIX 82. No de Inv.: 524.371.”

⁶ In his essay on the transcendent function (June 1916/1957), Jung mentioned that some patients could employ an aesthetic understanding evasively and would need to experience the autonomy of their own unconscious and its imperatives; others inclined to be possessed by unconscious contents might profit from aesthetic understanding that renders the contents objectified but meaningful to consciousness.

greatest importance, obscured though it is by the Christian abhorrence of anything Gnostic.” (Jung 1970 §133)

Jung continues:

“The reconciliation of these opposites is a major problem, and even in antiquity it bothered certain minds. Thus we know of an otherwise legendary personality of the second century, Carpocrates, a Neoplatonist philosopher whose school, according to Irenaeus, taught that good and evil are merely human opinions and that the soul, before its departure from the body, must pass through the whole gamut of human experience to the very end if it is not to fall back into the prison of the body.”(Jung 1970 §133)

These exact references to Gnostic doctrines that Borges discovered in Jung, he uses in his short stories “The Theologians” and “Three Versions of Judas” (both in *Ficciones*, 1956) and in “The Sect of Thirty” (in *The Book of Sand*, 1975).

And in the important essay, “Pascal’s Sphere” (in *Other Inquisitions*), Borges provides the original name of “one of these philosophers” mentioned in passing by Jung in the following passage that Borges marked in *Psychology and Religion*, concerning the image of God as a sphere:

“This abstruse problem was itself a psychological projection of something much older and completely unconscious. But they knew in those days that the circle signified the Deity: ‘God is an intellectual figure whose centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere,’ as one of these philosophers said, repeating St Augustine.” (Jung 1970 §98)

Supplementing Jung’s text, Borges writes:

“The French theologian Alain de Lille –Alanus de Insulis— discovered towards the end of the XI century this formula that the coming ages would not forget: ‘God is an intellectual figure whose centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.’” (Borges 1970 7)

Borges quotes Jung without naming him, who quotes Alain de Lille without naming him either: the intellectual creative act as a sly game of tag.

Readers from different intellectual fields have found many different inspirations in the writings of Jung. Quantum physicists such as Pauli, poets such as W. H. Auden, musicians such as John Cage, have found in Jung sources of learning. Borges was different in that in Jung, he found a mirror for his readings. That is to say, he found another reader who culled from the universal library of poetry, science, alchemy and religion items that would serve to build his own particular Library of Babel. For Borges, Jung became one of those secret writers whose readings fed his own and from which he could construct very personal labyrinths and fictions, unique because of the very fact that

they are patchworks or constellations that we now call borgesian. In "The Precursors of Kafka" (in *Other Inquisitions*) Borges wrote, defining his own craft: "Every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past as it will modify that of the future. In this correlation the identity of plurality of men does not matter" (Borges 1964b 108). Borges was describing Kafka, but he was also describing himself, Jorge Luis Borges, and Carl Gustav Jung.

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