Confronting the Shadow: The Hero’s Journey in Borges’ ‘El Etnógrafo’

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Abstract

This article focuses on ‘El Etnógrafo’ ['The Anthropologist' (di Giovanni trans.)], a brief and deceptively simple tale from Borges' *Elogio de la sombra* (1969) [In Praise of Darkness (1975)]. The tale’s protagonist, Fred Murdock, undergoes a profound transformation whilst conducting anthropological field research in the North American prairie, centred on his separation from his home and his dialogue with the tribal medicine man. In particular, under the instruction of the medicine man, Murdock learns to focus on and recount his dreams. The brief narrative may be appraised and amplified as embodying characteristics of the hero’s journey as examined by Carl Jung, and as illustrated by Joseph Campbell. In this perspective, Murdock accepts the call to adventure, engages in symbolic struggles, experiences a deep and transformative healing with the shaman, and returns home empowered with deeper wisdom. In this article I concentrate on the pattern of the hero’s journey as depicted both in ‘El Etnógrafo’ and in other tales of Borges, evaluating the particular healing dimension of the confrontation with the personal and collective shadow, the relationship with the wise senex-figure of the medicine man, and the attention to the language of dreams. I consider, consequently, the nature of psychic healing as portrayed both within the narrative – Murdock’s journey – and outside the narrative – the reader’s journey, as twin epistemological destinations. This article constitutes part of a larger project that evaluates the relationship between Borges’ aesthetic *obra* and Jung’s psychological writings, their shared attention to mysticism and to the role of dreams, myths, narratives, creativity and active imagination, healing and the process of individuation.

**Keywords:** Borges; ‘El Etnógrafo’, ‘The Anthropologist’; Jung; Joseph Campbell; individuation; hero; shaman; Native American; shadow

Artists are magical helpers. Evoking symbols and motifs that connect us to our deeper selves, they can help us along the heroic journey of our own lives.

(Joseph Campbell 2004: 132)

I’ve always been a great reader of Jung.

(Borges, in Burgin 1969: 109)

Borges’ later fictions have received far less critical attention than his well-known publications of *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949). Bell-Villada (1999), for example, dismisses *El Informe de Brodie* as ‘rather slight’, suggesting that: ‘Because none of the material in *Dr. Brodie’s Report* even approaches the level of the *Ficciones* or the stories in *El Aleph*, there is little reason to discuss any one piece in detail’ (260). The prose
pieces of *Elogio de la sombra* (1969) [*In Praise of Darkness* (1975)] and the tales of *El libro de arena* [*The Book of Sand* (1975)] and *La Memoria de Shakespeare* [*Shakespeare’s Memory* (1983)] are, with notable exceptions, often overlooked. This can be explained partly by the enigmatic and at times pseudo-realist character of these later fictions, which may fail to evoke the labyrinthine complexity and literary puzzles of his earlier pieces. This to me is a scholarly oversight, as I feel that Borges’ later works – poetry, fiction, essays and interviews – demonstrate a creative mind grappling with equal intensity with the philosophical and metaphysical questions as his earlier work, only with a style that employs fewer devices and strategies to catalyse the particular puzzle-solving detective faculty in the reader. An example of this is the brief (just over 600 words) and deceptively simple tale ‘El Etnógrafo’ of *Elogio de la sombra*, which has received curiously little scholarly attention. Brevity in Borges generally betrays deep currents, and a close reading of this tale opens many avenues implicit in the text. In particular, the tale embodies crucial elements of the hero’s journey as extensively examined by C.G. Jung, a journey that analogises the process of psychic healing expressed by Jung as Individuation.

In this article I appraise ‘El Etnógrafo’ alongside other fictions of Borges that represent aspects of the hero’s journey. In particular, I evaluate the particular dynamics reflected in the tale of the stages of the journey as articulated by Jung scholar Joseph Campbell as the ‘Monomyth’, which he observed in mythological tales across time and cultures: the summons away from home, the confrontation with the shadow, the dialogue with the *senex* (wise old man) figure, the death and resurrection, the magical knowledge and the return home. Psychopathology, Jung argued, arises commonly through an individual’s inability or unwillingness to assess the distinction between ego and persona and to explore the ego’s relationship with unconscious complexes and archetypal figures. The hero’s journey thus expresses the ego’s inner journey into the unconscious to acknowledge and integrate these areas which, through being ignored, block psychic energy (libido), and being contemplated, release this energy. In this sense, Murdock, the protagonist of ‘El Etnógrafo’, can be analysed as engaging in this process of psychic healing, gaining wisdom and a deeper understanding of his own psyche. He can also be seen as embodying a collective psyche that confronts a collective shadow and gains deeper understanding of unconscious processes. This analysis corresponds to a larger project in which I evaluate the shifting oeuvre of Borges in the light of Jung’s process of individuation – the journey towards the self, often depicted in literature and mythology as the hero’s journey. This is not, however, a psychoanalytical appraisal of the tale, rather it follows the amplification analysis customary to Jung’s depth psychology which reveals an archetypal mythic pattern apparent within both ‘El Etnógrafo’ and other tales of Borges. By such an evaluation I hope to depict within the tale an implicit search for psychic wholeness – the voyage into the unconscious and the confrontation with the shadow – analogised by the hero’s journey.

There is a rich tradition in the Borges scholarship of binding his work to his biography through a psychoanalytical perspective, most notably Freudian, but also, in the case of Rodríguez Monegal (1978), through a Lacanian and Kleinian lens.
Characteristic of the psychoanalytical reading are the Oedipal, Narcissistic and parricidal elements of his life and work, described by Rodríguez Monegal (1990) in a later article:

Educated by his father in the writer’s calling, he had practiced it as a son; in so doing he avoided parricide. But on the death of his father in 1938, and after an accident on Christmas Eve of the same year, Borges committed symbolic suicide in order to conceal the parricide and to be free to begin writing his most important fictions. (Rodríguez Monegal 1990: 129)

This interpretation, which Woodall described as ‘an obsessively psychoanalytical view of the man’ (1997: xxi), remains influential, with parallel arguments concerning the failed writer-father, the overbearing mother, the consequent troubled relationships with women and the clues of this dynamic implicit in the literary works, forming the central narrative of Williamson’s Borges: A life (2004). There are limitations, however, to the psychoanalytical reading of Borges, as it can limit the artistic creation to a mere cipher of this dominant Freudian dynamic of psychological trauma. This is highlighted by Earle (2000) in his review of the starkly Freudian analysis by Woscoboinik (1998):

‘In this psycho-portrait our model is cornered by the ghosts of Oedipus and Narcissus – the mother-obsession and the self-obsession, that is – and never escapes’ (100). Furthermore, Borges himself was critical of Freudian psychoanalytical analyses establishing too rigid a bond between artistic creativity and childhood, family and sexuality. His scathing comments to Burgin about Freud’s obsession are well known:

I think of [Freud] as a kind of madman, no? A man laboring over a sexual obsession. Well, perhaps he didn’t take it to heart. Perhaps he was just doing it as a kind of game. I tried to read him, and I thought of him either as a charlatan or as a madman, in a sense. After all, the world is far too complex to be boiled down to that all-too-simple scheme. (Burgin 1969: 109)

His views of Freud chime closely with those that Jung expressed later in his life concerning Freud’s obsessive desire to maintain his theories of sexuality, and, indeed, in the same interview Borges expressed his respect for Jung: ‘Jung I have read far more widely than Freud, but in Jung you feel a wide and hospitable mind’ (Burgin 1969: 109). Borges was an engaged reader of Jung, citing his work on numerous occasions. However, his familiarity with Jung’s works should not be considered here as grounds for perceiving a necessary Jungian influence on his writings, such as one might find, for example, a conscious influence of Freud upon certain Dadaist artists. Rather I hope to demonstrate that the archetypal narrative of the Hero, as indicated by Jung and illustrated by Campbell, is apparent in Borges’ art as it is apparent in dreams, myths and art across time and culture.

‘El Etnógrafo’
In a customary fashion, Borges author and Borges narrator are conflated in the opening lines of the tale: ‘El caso me lo refieron’ (46) ['This story was told me'], and
the narrative is located in the temporal and spatial distance. In this way, as with many of the tales of El Informe de Brodie, it is given a mythological, timeless dimension by the implication of anecdote, suggesting that the narrator Borges is not author but mere storyteller recounting a tale that he was told some time ago, the events of which took place even further ago. This is an important aspect of this and other tales, as the narrative assumes a collective nature, becoming the creation not of a lone artist, but of tradition. Pursuing this avenue, one can perceive the protagonist of the tale as everyman, embodying aspects of a collective psyche in addition to that of the author. This is at once visible in ‘El Etnógrafo’ both in the fact that Murdock is also the thousands of characters ‘visibles e invisibles, vivos y muertos’ (46) [‘seen and unseen, living and dead’], and by the fact that Murdock is depicted with only the barest of defining characteristics. He is credulous and naïve, unquestioning of authority, harbouring an underdeveloped critical faculty which would prohibit him from engaging in any philosophical, metaphysical or psychological exploration. Murdock’s ingenuous character dramatizes the radicality of his transformation during the narrative, positioning the initial lack of consciousness against the later position of heightened consciousness. Jung depicts this character type as in ignorance of the unconscious and consequently living in peril of neurotic fear of the unknown: ‘A man who is unconscious of himself acts in a blind, instinctive way and is in addition fooled by all the illusions that arise when he sees everything that he is not conscious of in himself coming to meet him from outside as projections’ (1983: 335). This state of passivity sets the scene for the development of ego-consciousness in relation to the unconscious, a process analogized in the journey of the hero. Whilst numerous passages of Jung’s extensive work elucidate this psychic process, it is summarized cogently by Joseph Campbell as the prototypical sequence of steps pursued by mythic heroes across time and cultures, illustrated dramatically in The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949). Campbell borrowed the term ‘monomyth’ from Joyce’s Finnegans Wake to describe this process: ‘A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man’ (1949: 30 [original italics]). Importantly, through his passivity, Murdock embodies a collective ego that is likewise not in tune with the deeper dimensions of the unconscious. This becomes apparent when Murdock leaves the security of home and its nurturing environment and plunges into the unknown represented by the prairie. The narrator reveals that one of Murdock’s ancestors had died in hostility with the Indians and that ‘esa antigua discordia de sus estirpes era un vínculo ahora’ (46) [‘this old family bloodshed was now a link’]. A link to what? The relationship here is immediately apparent with Borges and his ancestral heritage (Williamson 2004: 24), and as such Murdock confronts a personal shadow in the guise of ancestral strife, and his trip to the prairie could indicate a step towards redemption or vindication of this historical enmity. Murdock certainly prepares himself for such an encounter, aware that in order to learn the language of ‘los hombres rojos’ (46) [‘the red men’ (47)] he would need to be accepted by them: ‘Previó, sin duda, las dificultades que lo
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aguardaban; tenía que lograr que los hombres rojos lo aceptaran como unos de los suyos’ (46) [‘No doubt he foresaw the difficulties that were in store for him; he would have to do his best to get the red men to accept him as one of them’]. Murdock is also symbolically bound to the Indians by the curious facial description of ‘de perfil de hacha’ (46) [‘hatchet face’], which evokes the mythologized Native American hatchet.

Amplifying Murdock to the embodiment of collective psyche, however, his experience expresses a collective confrontation with the traditional ‘other’ represented by the Indians. Campbell describes this archetypal encounter and its significance:

There’s a lot in you that’s neither being carried into this persona system nor into your ego, as part of what you perceive as “you.” Just opposite to the ego, buried in the unconscious, is what Jung calls the shadow. […] The nature of your shadow is a function of the nature of your ego. It is the backside of your light side. In the myths, the shadow is represented as the monster that has to be overcome, the dragon. It is the dark thing that comes up from the abyss and confronts you the minute you begin moving down into the unconscious. It is the thing that scares you so that you don’t want to go down there. (2004: 73)

Two streams are developing together, therefore: Murdock as individual confronting his personal shadow tied to his ancestry; and Murdock as westerner confronting the shadow of the Indian. Jung wrote plentifully about the conflict between westerners and indigenous Americans as a projection of the European shadow content upon the radical ‘other’. Projection implies lack of conscious awareness of such a process, and thus the Indian who is labelled savage and barbarous reflects the savage and barbarous nature of the European/American: ‘I have frequently observed in the analysis of Americans that the inferior side of the personality, the “shadow”, is represented by a Negro or Indian’ (1956: 183). Jung perceives in individual psyches the centuries-old conflict across the Americas concerning civilization and barbarism, a debate repeatedly reflected in Borges’ writing. It is important to note that this article is not a fresh evaluation of the matter of civilization and barbarism in Borges, primarily because such a complex issue requires a deep assessment of Borges’ relationship with his soldier ancestors, his depiction of the caudillo Rosas, his interpretation of Martín Fierro, gauchos, Indians, knife-fighters and hoodlums, Perón and Evita, the Third Reich, communism, hippies (Guibert 1974: 106), and the military junta of the Dirty War. The conflicting polarities of civilization and barbarism are reflected in his appreciation or dislike of novelists and poets, philosophies, theologies and cosmologies, and in his interpretation of such philosophical dialectics as William James’ ‘tough-minded’ or ‘tender-minded’, Jung’s shadow complex, or Nietzsche’s articulation of the cosmopolitan Apollonian and the barbarian Dionysian. The debate is central to the Argentine national character and is central to Borges and his readership. For wider analysis see: Balderston (1993), Ulla (2002), Williamson (2004), and Orrego Arismendi (2007).

Importantly for Borges, however, the time-worn debate evoked in the sixteenth century by Las Casas and Sepúlveda and rearticulated by Sarmiento cannot be reduced to a simple binary. As indicated by the enumeration above, barbarism is visible in
Borges’ work in many guises beyond the mythical Indian, and indeed constitutes an essential characteristic of the individual psyche. In this way one can see Dahlmann’s journey into the unconscious in the tale ‘El Sur’ [‘The South’] leading him to confrontation with his shadow projection, the gauchos. In this tale the gaucho represents the brutish opposite of Dahlmann — uncultured, instinctive, dealing not with abstraction but tangible reality — but also, conversely, what Dahlmann most desires. Such an interpretation is reinforced by the idea that Borges himself supported, that Dahlmann’s whole adventure into the pampa was a dream, and hence a compensatory vision of unconscious desire. The integration of the shadow, in this case through the ritual death with the assistance of the senex figure who throws him the knife, is one of compensation, and brings about symbolic psychic wholeness. Similarly, in the tale of Brodie ‘El evangelio según Marcos’ [‘The Gospel according to Mark’], the protagonist Espinosa and the rustic Gutre family (who themselves are of ‘civilized’ Scottish ancestry) enact a symbolic union of compensation — the civilized embodying the barbarous and vice versa — through Espinosa’s ritual crucifixion. The ‘indio de ojos celestes’ [‘Indian with blue eyes’] of ‘El cautivo’ [‘The Captive’] is both barbarous and civilized, unable to remain rooted to one polarity. Lastly, as Bell-Villada (1999: 158–9) discusses, the tale of ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva’ [‘Story of the Warrior and the Captive’] concerns the double characterization of the Lombard barbarian warrior who becomes civilized and the civilized Englishwoman who turns savage, but also the pairing of the cautivas — the Englishwoman and Borges’ grandmother, one civilized one savage, both captive; and consequently the double guerrero — Droctulf and Colonel Borges (159). These multiple and subtle pairings in Borges’ fiction evoke a strongly Jungian alchemical vision of the twin polarities within each individual psyche: light and dark, civilized and barbarous, ego and shadow.

It is interesting to note that both Jung and Borges were fascinated by Stevenson’s tale Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), Jung equating Mr Hyde with our shadow (Fordman 1953: 49), Borges acknowledging that his tales ‘Borges y yo’ [‘Borges and I’], and ‘El otro’ [‘The Other’] were adaptations of Stevenson’s tale (Borges 1982: 166), and that ‘Las ruinas circulares’ [‘The Circular Ruins’] was a retelling of his tale ‘El Golem’, which itself follows Wilde’s Picture of Dorian Gray, which itself was a retelling of Jekyll and Hyde (Borges 1982: 82). In brief, therefore, Borges repeatedly evokes the confrontation with the barbarous other, often depicted as fetch, doppelgänger, gaucho, Indian or knife-fighter, who evokes a powerful psychic drive within the ‘civilized’ protagonists and whose integration is often evoked by a ritual death. Borges’ position is strikingly akin to Jung’s in this perspective, and importantly can be understood within a framework of the process of individuation, the journey towards psychic wholeness. Just as Dahlmann integrates the shadow of the barbarous in his journey south, so Jung writes of the ‘savage’ or the ‘primitive’ within us whose integration likewise propels the individual or the collective towards wholeness: ‘Indeed, for a wide-awake person, the primitive contents may often prove to be a source of renewal’ (1993: 195). And just as Borges recognized the cult of violence that lay within his psyche hidden beneath layers of language, literature and culture, so Jung recounts in his memoirs a ‘primitive’ figure who appeared in a dream.
and who led him to conclude that: ‘The small, brown-skinned savage who accompanied me […] was an embodiment of the primitive shadow’ (1989: 181).

Murdock endures the arduous separation from home, friends, family, customs and even his language over his two-year encampment on the plains. He confronts a deeper aspect of the ‘barbarous’ shadow, both on a personal and collective level, with the great challenge to the deep-set epistemological certainties that his culture had instilled in him: ‘llegó a pensar de una manera que su lógica rechazaba’ (48) ['he came to see things in a way his reason rejected']. This is the result of his many months of apprenticeship, his dialogue with the tribal ‘sacerdote’ ['medicine man'], his rigorous moral and physical exercises and his awakening understanding of the language of dreams. It is at this level that the most profound transformation occurs with Murdock, discernible in his realization that ‘en las noches de luna llena soñaba con bisontes’ (48) ['on nights when the moon was full he dreamed of bison'].8 This insight, which he relays to the medicine man, signifies the conclusion of his sojourn on the prairie and he returns home. Importantly, Murdock has engaged on the hero’s journey – a narrative encountered in countless myths (Campbell) and dreams (Jung) – allegorizing the journey inward into the unconscious (Campbell 2004: 111–33). Having heeded the herald (his professor) and headed out to the prairie, having undergone trials and training, he encounters in his dreams the tribe’s totem animal, the bison. The bison represents another shadow projection of Western history, as they were slaughtered en masse during the final decades of the nineteenth century in order to drive the nomadic tribes into the reservations and make way for cattle. Campbell explored the importance of the buffalo in Native American myths, discussing the impact of the slaughter in depth with Bill Moyers: ‘That was a sacramental violation. […] The frontiersmen shot down whole herds, taking only the skins to sell and leaving the bodies there to rot. That was a sacrilege. It turned the buffalo from a “thou” to an “it”’ (Campbell 1988: 78).9 The slaughter of the bison was not simply a strategy to assist ethnic translocation; it was also, as Campbell observes, an attempt to erase the animal nature from within the Euro-American psyche, concomitant with a refusal to acknowledge the shadow. Jung intuited that such acts of extreme aggression arose from a fear of the unconscious content: ‘When I see a man in a savage rage with something outside himself, I know that he is, in reality, wanting to be savage toward his own unconscious self’ (1993: 16). Murdock has thus passed through a threshold from one mythic order represented by ‘razón’ ['reason'] and ‘ciencia’ ['science'] into another represented by dreams, the full moon and the totem animal.

Everything has changed for Murdock. He had set out on the adventure at the behest of the professor in order to study indigenous languages and later to present the thesis. After radical separation from home and a new vision of reality, he returns home and, like the captive of the eponymous tale, he feels homesick for the prairie. He returns to the professor and informs him that he will not present the thesis. What has changed? There are many aspects to this question. Firstly, on an individual basis, Murdock has atoned for his ancestor who died in a skirmish with the Indians. This family lineage is symbolic of a collective need to atone for the brutality of colonialism. However, the tale is not a discourse in postcolonialism, and atonement for colonialism
is a loose interpretation. Murdock has learned to harken to his dreams. Here the aesthetics of Borges and the psychology of Jung come together in harmony. A central pillar of Jung’s entire life’s work rests on the importance of dreams, in brief, as messages from the unconscious:

In the end, we have to ask what the aim of the dream is from a teleological point of view. Why does this person’s unconscious wish to show him an image like that? [...] The dream is a product of the imagination, a gallery of images, images of protection from some blow that is threatening; the function of the dream is to compensate the conscious attitude. I believe that what dreams show us in vivid and impressive images are our vulnerable points. (1993: 143)

Dreams are cognate with the epistemological value of active imagination and are the fundamental portal for an exploration of the unconscious; they manifest archetypal images and mythic narratives; are habitual factors of synchronicity and as such can operate outside of ego-consciousness, time and space; are pertinent to the psychic and physiological state of the individual; and consequently are of absolute importance for the process of psychic healing.

It is in our dreams that the body makes itself aware to our mind. The dream is in large part a warning of something to come. The dream is the body’s best expression, in the best possible symbol it can express, that something is going wrong. The dream calls our mind’s attention to the body’s instinctive feeling. If man doesn’t pay attention to these symbolic warnings of his body he pays in other ways. A neurosis is merely the body’s taking control, regardless of the conscious mind. (1993: 49)

Borges likewise pays attention to dreams, recognizing their importance in his own literary production, observing their perennial importance in artistic creativity across cultures, puzzling over their oblique relationship with linear time, and acknowledging that they reveal much of the psychic state of the individual. Borges refers to Jung’s deep analysis into dream symbolism, suggesting in ‘El verdugo piadoso’ [‘The Pitying Torturer’] (one of the Nueve Ensayos Dantescos) that ‘La segunda [conjetura] equipara, según la doctrina de Jung, las invenciones literarias a las invenciones oníricas’ (1989: 357) [‘The second conjecture, following the doctrine of Jung, equates literary and oneiric inventions’ (2000: 284)]. This equation of literary and dream creativity is a constant throughout Borges’ work, and indeed, like Jung, attention to dreams and nightmares forms a mainstay of his philosophical discourse.10 ‘Los sueños son una obra estética, quizá la expresión estética más antigua. Torna una forma extrañamente dramática’ (1989: 231) [‘Dreams are an aesthetic work, perhaps the most ancient aesthetic expression. They take a strangely dramatic form’ (1984: 40)]. Borges places a strong epistemological value on the dreamworld and the aesthetic, and innumerable passages testify to the power of dreams to grant the dreamer knowledge of deeper aspects of the self and further panoramas of landscapes and times. Dreams are crucial, both for Borges and for Jung, in pursuing the path towards psychic well-being.

Murdock has thus travelled deep into the unknown, and has released the powerful psychic energy represented by the dream of the bison. This is the energy of healing,
the vital force that is essential to the shaman in tribal societies and was essential for Jung. The medicine man himself would have had to walk the similar path of physical and psychological separation, arduous training and attention to dreams prior to gaining the power to heal. Such a process of trauma is documented in the literature concerning shamanism (Eliade 1972, Halifax 1982, McKenna 1991), encapsulated by Campbell: ‘In primal societies, the shaman provides a living conduit between the local and the transcendent. The shaman is one who has actually gone through a psychological crack-up and recovery’ (2004: xviii). In this respect, the medicine man acts as psychoanalyst for Murdock, guiding him on his exploration of the unconscious, supporting him in the darkness. So strong is that association between shaman and doctor that Campbell’s explanation of it deserves quoting in full:

Psychoanalysis, the modern science of reading dreams, has taught us to take heed of these unsubstantial images. Also it has found a way to let them do their work. The dangerous crises of self-development are permitted to come to pass under the protecting eye of an experienced initiate in the lore and language of dreams, who then enacts the role and character of the ancient mystagogue, or guide of souls, the initiating medicine man of the primitive forest sanctuaries of trial and initiation. The doctor is the modern master of the mythological realm, the knower of all the secret ways and words of potency. His role is precisely that of the Wise Old Man of the myths and fairy tales whose words assist the hero through the trials and terrors of the weird adventure. He is the one who appears and points to the magic shining sword that will kill the dragon-terror, tells of the waiting bride and the castle of many treasures, applies healing balm to the almost fatal wounds, and finally dismisses the conqueror, back into the world of normal life, following the great adventure into the enchanted night. (1949: 9–10)

Murdock returns home radically transformed from the naïve and uncritical student that he was prior to his voyage of discovery, and informs his professor that he intends not to publish. This interchange – also a symbolic confrontation – is of particular importance for an understanding of the psychological processes of the narrative. Murdock has changed but the academy has not. He has activated a powerful force of psychic energy through his journey, and yet the wisdom gained lies beyond the strict measures of academic discourse. His professor is visibly displeased with this judgement and snidely alludes to the fact that Murdock has abandoned his culture and language, that he has gone native. But Murdock does not intend to return to the prairie; he has integrated the psychic force represented by the shadow figures of the Indian and the bison, and has returned to his cultural home. The westerner, Jung argued, cannot pretend that his roots lie elsewhere and that his psychic constitution is other than its particular cultural formation. Jung, perhaps problematically from our twenty-first century outlook, perceived certain people, such as the Taos Pueblo Indians or the eastern Africans (Jung 1989), operating with a more direct, unconscious and less ego-orientated psychic structure than the Europeans. He consequently advised against an abandonment of the ‘storm-lantern of the ego’ (Von Franz 1975: 41), not allowing it to be engulfed in the dark seas of the unconscious. For this reason, as documented in his memoirs, he broke up a festive nocturnal drum and dance ceremony in the Sudan as he felt threatened by the overwhelming forces of
unconscious energy: ‘At that time I was obviously all too close to “going black”’ (1989: 271); and, as Schlamm (2010) discusses, he was unwilling to meet Hindu gurus whilst on his trip to India in 1938, erroneously believing them to advocate ego abandonment. This also explains his fears over the use of psychedelic drugs (Von Franz 1971: 41). Murdock has not turned his back on his culture, nor has he abandoned ego-consciousness, but has chosen to return with the shadow energy fully integrated. The hero must always return.

Here a further dynamic is established between Murdock’s journey and the process of individuation. Borges was a close reader of William James (as was his father and Macedonio Fernández). In particular, Borges’ evaluation of mysticism owes much to the four characteristics of mystical states articulated by James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902: 380): ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity. Borges’ reading of Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhart, Emmanuel Swedenborg and Blake (all of whom Jung also read) demonstrates his employment of these four terms in navigating the ontologically challenging texts (Rowlandson 2011). His own two mystical experiences, furthermore, conform to these characteristics.

In my life I only had two mystical experiences and I can’t tell them because what happened is not to be put in words, since words, after all, stand for a shared experience. And if you have not had the experience you can’t share it – as if you were to talk about the taste of coffee and had never tried coffee. Twice in my life I had a feeling, a feeling rather agreeable than otherwise. It was astonishing, astounding, I was overwhelmed, taken aback. I had the feeling of living not in time but outside time. It may have been a minute or so, it may have been longer. […] Somehow the feeling came over me that I was living beyond time, and I did my best to capture it, but it came and went. I wrote poems about it, but they are normal poems and do not tell the experience. I cannot tell it to you, since I cannot retell it to myself, but I had that experience, and I had it twice over, and maybe it will be granted me to have it one more time before I die. (Borges 1982: 11)

The noetic and the ineffable are of crucial importance in our evaluation of Murdock’s experience, as he has acquired wisdom, yet is unable to express it in arid academic prose that lacks the vocabulary of the experience. Murdock, like Borges, experienced something mystical, noetic yet ineffable, instructive yet beyond language. This has a further relationship with Jung, for whom the process of individuation – the hero’s journey – will constellate archetypal images which are endowed with numinosity. In a 1945 letter, Jung accredits his work as a medical doctor as healing through the numinous – a potent statement that binds him with the shamans and medicine men of tribal cultures:

I know it is exceedingly difficult to write anything definite or descriptive about the progression of psychological states. It always seemed to me as if the real milestones were certain symbolic events characterized by a strong emotional tone. You are quite right, the main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neuroses but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology. Even the very disease takes on a numinous character. (Hollis and Rosen 2003: 120)
Within Jung’s dynamic process, therefore, one cannot separate healing from the numinous, or, as Campbell expresses it, healing is made possible by becoming ‘transparent to the transcendent’ (2004: xvii). Thus Murdock’s journey and the revelation it affords him is a voyage of healing. But what was Murdock’s (psycho) pathology prior to his journey? Here, as described above, it is important to consider Murdock embodying a collective psyche. In response to his professor, Murdock declares that ‘la ciencia, nuestra ciencia, me parece una mera frivolidad’ (48) [*science – our science – seems not much more than a trifle*]. Whilst on the prairie, ‘llegó a pensar de una manera que su lógica rechazaba’ (48) [*he came to see things in a way his reason rejected*]. Logic and science, the quintessence of the western dream of civilization, led Murdock’s ancestor to die fighting the Indians, and led his collective ancestors to slaughter the buffalo and herd the Indians into reservations. Logic and science deny the epistemological value and validity of fantasy, imagination, mythology and the dreamworld, the very lifeblood of the Indian community with whom Murdock resides and the very source of Borges’ and Jung’s aesthetic and psychological project. The numinous is taboo, and nowhere more than the university; and the professor is the stalwart representative of his institution.

Murdock’s professor advised him to head out to the prairie and to observe the rites and ‘que descubriera el secreto que los brujos revelan al iniciado’ (46) [*to uncover the medicine man’s secret*], an eccentric research proposal for one studying ‘lenguas indígenas’ [*aboriginal languages*]. He is then irked by Murdock’s later decision not to publish. Orrego Arismendi, one of the few scholars to have scrutinized ‘El Etnógrafo’, suggests that the professor is a likely analogue of Borges, ‘ansioso por saber lo que pasa por la mente nativa como solo podría estarlo el mismo Borges’ (2007: 49) [*eager, like Borges himself, to know what goes through the native mind*], owing primarily to his thirst to know these hidden secrets. This is a possible interpretation, if, for example, we correlate it to Borges’ desire whilst in Japan to examine his own mystical experiences with shinto and Buddhist monks. However, another angle would be to view the professor, ‘un hombre entrado en años’ [*a man getting along in years*], as one who has failed to engage in the process of individuation, nevertheless knowing that something is missing that he wishes to recover. Like the bride-snatcher depicted by Campbell (2004: 118), he is unwilling to venture on the journey himself; or, like the mythical King Mark, who entrusts Tristan to bring back his bride Iseult, unconsciously willing that Tristan does fall in love with her; or King Arthur, who unwittingly invites Lancelot and Guinevere to love, the professor seeks to seize the treasure by proxy, all the while unconsciously resigned to the understanding that the journey *is* the treasure. Murdock tells him as much: ‘El secreto, por lo demás, no vale lo que valen los caminos que me condujeron a él. Esos caminos hay que andarlos’ (48) [*The secret, I should tell you, is not as valuable as the steps that brought me to it. Those steps have to be taken, not told*]. Murdock here acts the same role as Bjarni Thorkelsson in Borges’ tale ‘Undr’, who, when exhorted by the narrator to reveal the secret word, declines, stating that: ‘He jurado no revelarla. Además, nadie puede enseñar nada. Debes buscarla solo’ (1989: 50) [*I have sworn not to divulge it. Besides, nobody can teach anything. You must find it out for yourself*]
(1979: 61). The professor’s psychic state corresponds to that described by Jung as exhibiting critical conflation of ego and persona and a pathological denial of unconscious content, (see, for example, his essay ‘Does the World Stand on the Verge of a Spiritual Rebirth?’ [1993: 67–76]). The professor represents the state of psychic disharmony that would be harmonized by the journey of the hero – the process of individuation – and as such his character is crucial for an understanding of the development of the tale.

Murdock is empowered by his experience. He has undergone a physical and spiritual adventure, has encountered the shadow, has learned from the senex, has experienced the numinous, and has returned enriched. And his adventure does not end there; the final words of the tale can be interpreted as his experience of the anima (for explanation of animus/â see Kast 2006) in the figure of his wife; and, as with the shadow figure, he assimilates rather than becomes this figure, symbolized by divorce. He then finds work in the library, a location depicted symbolically by Borges as the vault of human memory and knowledge, and thus Murdock inherits a psychic state representing perennial wisdom.

Murdock’s journey thus constitutes an archetypal voyage of the hero, illustrated in its perennial stages by Campbell’s Monomyth. In this way this tale, and other tales of Borges, reveal an unconscious prevailing force towards psychic wholeness, towards the self. It is at this level that Borges as poet/author can be traced along the pathway of individuation, seeking the elusive centre of the mandala-labyrinth. Importantly for this article, however, is the evocation both by Jung as psychologist and Borges as artist of a dynamic process that underscores an individual’s search for selfhood and knowledge, described by Jung as individuation, and depicted by Borges as the search for God, the ‘god in the making’ (1998: 209, 241; 1982: 109), his poem ‘Elogio de la sombra’: ‘Llego a mi centro, / a mi algebra y mi clave, / a mi espejo’ (1974: 1018) [‘I reach my centre, / my algebra and my key, / my mirror’] (1975: 127), or his perennial search for the true identity of ‘Borges’. Such a process is portrayed in numerous tales and poems and is reflected in his reading matter, such as Sufi mystics, Swedenborg and Dante. ‘El Etnógrafo’, an understudied tale, exhibits characteristics germane to the hero’s journey, a quest for knowledge integral to a process of healing. What Murdock learns out in the desert heals his soul. And what does he learn? We must go to the desert to find out.

Notes
1. di Giovanni (1975) translates the tale as ‘The Anthropologist’. All references here to the tale, both in Spanish and English, are from this edition.
3. Borges jokingly called Freud ‘not my favourite fiction writer’ (Barnstone 1999: 111), and Jason Wilson reminds us that Borges was ‘as anti-Marxism or anti-pyschoanalysis (merely

4. ‘There was no mistaking the fact that Freud was emotionally involved in his sexual theory to an extraordinary degree. When he spoke of it, his tone became urgent, almost anxious, and all signs of his normally critical and skeptical manner vanished. A strange, deeply moved expression came over his face, the cause of which I was at a loss to understand. I had a strong intuition that for him sexuality was a sort of numinosum’ (Jung 1989: 150). ‘When, then, Freud announced his intention of identifying theory and method and making them into some kind of dogma, I could no longer collaborate with him; there remained no choice for me but to withdraw’ (Jung 1989: 167).


6. There is much to link Borges and Jung at three levels: firstly, as mentioned, Borges’ engagement with Jung’s psychological works. Secondly, Jung’s and Borges’ debt to William James; their reading of mystics, especially Swedenborg, Dante, Jakob Boehme, Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhardt, Blake; their admiration of Schopenhauer and Kant; their reading of Gnosticism, hermeticism and alchemy, especially Paracelsus; their interpretation of the Book of Job; their critical reading of Joyce; their critique through a mythological prism of the Third Reich; their interest in the epistemological value of fantasy, imagination, myth, symbols and dreams. Thirdly, biographical parallels: their association with Gershom Scholem; their connection with Victoria Ocampo (she met Jung and sponsored Ramón Gómez de la Serna to translate Psychological Types [Tipos psicológicos: Buenos Aires 1945], the first Spanish translation). These matters are explored in my current wider study, but should not be considered in this case as constituting evidence for a Jungian influence on Borges. One might object to a comparative appraisal of Borges and Jung based on the idea that Jung was a psychologist and Borges an artist. I would argue, however, that Jung was manifestly an artist (viz The Red Book) and that Borges was fascinated by the complexities of the psyche. In this and other respects their projects have far more in common than has hitherto been acknowledged.

7. ‘It [“The South”] can be read in two ways. You may read it in a straightforward way and you may think that those things happen to a hero. Then, you may think there’s a kind of moral behind it – the idea that he loved the south and in the end the south destroyed him. But there’s another possibility, the possibility of the second half of the story which is hallucination. When the man is killed, he’s not really killed. He died in the hospital, and though that was a dream, a kind of wishful thinking, that was the kind of death he would have liked to have – in the pampas with a knife in his hand being stabbed to death. That was what he was looking forward to all the time. So I’ve written that story in order that it would be read both ways’ (in Burgin 1998: 8).

8. di Giovanni mistakenly translates ‘bisontes’ as ‘mustang’. I am unable to determine how that mistake arose.

9. Campbell also quotes the famous 1852 letter Chief Seattle wrote to the US President: ‘Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills is botted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone! Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what is it to say
goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival’ (1988: 34).

10. Borges, whilst recognizing the importance of dreams in psychology, is critical of what he feels is scant attention to nightmares: ‘I have read many books on dreams, volumes of psychology, but I never found anything interesting on nightmares’ (1982: 7).

11. Although Jung has often, anecdotally, been referred to as a shaman of sorts, Jungian analyst Roger Woolger, in his review of Jung’s Red Book (Woolger’s final publication prior to his death in 2011), declared this outright: ‘Now that we have the record of Jung’s struggles to integrate the polarities of scientist-philosopher versus mystic within his soul we can also see how they urged upon him another mantle that he was very reluctant to wear – because so many have been ridiculed and persecuted for wearing it – that of shaman-prophet. […] The evidence of the Red Book and of those who knew him intimately was that Jung was very much a shaman. […] Perhaps Shamdasani shies away from calling Jung a “shaman” because “shamanism” is not politically correct in academic or conservative professional circles in Britain’ (Woolger 2011: 4–5).

12. ‘I was not to recognize the real nature of this disturbance until some years later, when I stayed in tropical Africa. It had been, in fact, the first hint of “going black under the skin,” a spiritual peril which threatens the uprooted European in Africa to an extent not fully appreciated’ (Jung 1989: 245).

13. di Giovanni’s translation is here also imprecise.

14. ‘During a visit to the Rionan-ji Temple, a centre of Zen Buddhism, he met a monk, Morinaga Yushoku, with whom he had the most searching conversation of his entire visit to Japan. As with the nun, Borges wished to learn something of Yushoku’s commitment to the contemplative life, but above all he wanted to know whether the monk had ever experienced a mystical enlightenment. María recalled that Borges kept pressing this point, and Yushoku replied that he had twice experienced nirvana but that it was impossible to convey such an experience to someone who had not himself found enlightenment.

All the same, Borges described to the monk an experience he had undergone one night in the 1920s while roaming the outskirts of Buenos Aires, when the sight of a particular moonlit street had induced a preternatural sense that time was an illusion [‘Sentirse en muerte’ (‘Feeling in Death’)]. Might such an episode qualify as a mystical illumination? That was possible, came the reply, since an illumination could be prompted by any number of things, such as the ringing of a bell or the sound of water flowing over a stone, but true enlightenment would entail a complete transformation of the soul and would change everything in a man’s life. The monk explained that one must dispel the illusion of selfhood in order to experience enlightenment: our sense of personal identity was the product of our conditioning, but otherwise there was nothing within us, not basis for the existence of the self, and so one must shed all notions of individuality and start again from zero before one could reach nirvana’ (Williamson 2004: 443).

Works Cited


Confronting the shadow: the hero’s journey in Borges’ ‘El Etnógrafo’


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