CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“NECESSARY MONSTERS”: BORGES’ BOOK OF IMAGINARY BEINGS AND THE ONTOLOGY OF THE DAIMONIC

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“For Daimons exist, and will continue to exist” (Patrick Harpur).1

“Imagination was now stimulated to a new, strange mode of perception” (Olaf Stapledon).2

That Borges, an author and poet of such prolific output, should have found the time to research and compile the bestiary of otherworld entities The Book of Imaginary Beings3 is remarkable. He and fellow researcher Margarita Guerrero trawled the arcane volumes of the Biblioteca Nacional in Buenos Aires, and their selection of around one hundred brief texts and summaries demonstrates not only their tremendous enthusiasm for the project but also a deep knowledge of the subject of “the strange creatures conceived through time and space by the human imagination”.4 They recount episodes from Pliny and Ovid, Sufi poets and the Koran, Icelandic Saga and Anglo-Saxon epic poems, Japanese mythologies and Chinese folklore, Chilean pre-Hispanic legends and tales from the Dakota, Shakespeare and Quevedo, Flaubert and Kafka. It is a rich bestiary.

In the preface, Borges and Guerrero (although the style betrays the dominant voice of Borges) evoke a child gazing with wonder at the wondrous beasts in a zoo, on his first ever visit:

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1 Harpur: 276.
2 Stapledon: 5.
A small child is taken to the zoo for the first time. This child may be any one of us or, to put it another way, we have been this child and have forgotten about it. In these grounds—these terrible grounds—the child sees living animals he has never before glimpsed; he sees jaguars, vultures, bison, and—what is still stranger—giraffes. He sees for the first time the bewildering variety of the animal kingdom, and this spectacle, which might alarm or frighten him, he enjoys. He enjoys it so much that going to the zoo is one of the pleasures of childhood, or is thought to be such [...]. It may be stated that all children, by definition, are explorers, and that to discover the camel is in itself no stranger than to discover a mirror or water or a staircase. It can also be stated that the child trusts his parents, who take him to this place full of animals. Besides, his toy tiger and the pictures of tigers in the encyclopedia have somehow taught him to look at the flesh-and-bone tiger without fear. Plato (if he were invited to join in this discussion) would tell us that the child had already seen the tiger in a primal world of archetypes, and that now on seeing the tiger he recognizes it. Schopenhauer (even more wondrously) would tell us that the child looks at the tigers without fear because he is aware that he is the tigers and the tigers are him or, more accurately, that both he and the tigers are but forms of that single essence, the Will.5

The evocation of the child is of key importance in introducing a work of this nature, as when confronted with the daimonic, our conceptual schema are in many ways as underdeveloped as those of the child. Consequently, as Borges identifies, one of the factors that prevents the child from becoming horrified and overwhelmed by the creatures of the “terrible grounds” of the zoo is the presence of his parents, whom he trusts. They, the child would surmise, would not lead him into the realm of monsters in order to watch him being devoured. He is protected by their wisdom and guidance. Now, says Borges, “let us pass now from the zoo of reality to the zoo of mythologies, to the zoo whose denizens are not lions but sphinxes and griffons and centaurs”.6 Such terrible grounds likewise exist, yet many choose not to pass through the gates. Where are the child’s parents in such a location? Who will prevent him being devoured? Throughout the work Borges and Guerrero select texts from a variety of mediaeval bestiaries, such as the tenth-century Exeter Book (Codex Exoniensis), from which they examine the mythical figures of the panther and the whale. They also consult Buddhist, Vedic, Islamic and pre-Colombian texts and codices, the volumes of Swedenborg, Reverend Kirk’s Secret Commonwealth and W. B. Yeats’ The Celtic Twilight. In this respect Imaginary Beings constitutes a continuation of this ancient

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tradition of scholarship in which the reader may find guidance whilst contemplating the poorly charted landscape of the imagination. Here, indeed, be dragons. But what is the nature of this guidance if there is no stable taxonomy of such outlandish creatures, no consensual system of identification and classification, no concrete details? Through what philosophical or metaphysical light does Borges present these beings?

Borges insisted that he was neither philosopher nor theorist, but merely a man of letters. As such, only in rare moments do we find in his writings clear theoretical analysis of philosophical, theological, metaphysical or even political concerns; indeed in my book *Borges, Swedenborg and Mysticism* (2013), I piece together from the depth and breadth of his work a general theory of mysticism, and I detect a strong influence of William James. Likewise, whilst one finds many references to daimonic, otherworld, or “imaginary” beings in his work—from his early essay “A History of Angels” (1926) to his dream communication with the deceased in *Atlas* (1984)—one finds scant analytical scrutiny of such matters. Nevertheless, as with his perspectives on mystics and mysticism, one may detect from a close reading of his many works a mind deeply fascinated with and even touched by conscious entities beyond the limitations of material reality. But how did Borges approach and conceptualise such daimonic entities encountered either in the many hundreds of texts with which he was familiar, in his own fiction, in his dreams and in his imagination? He presents the child in the preface of *Imaginary Beings* as being as bewildered by the oddity of animals of the zoo as by the creatures

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7 “I am a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature” (Alazraki: 31). “I’m not really a thinker. I’m a literary man and I have done my best to use the literary possibilities of philosophy” (Burgin 1998: 8). “I am neither philosopher nor metaphysician. What I have done is exploit, or explore—a more noble word—the literary possibilities of philosophy. […] I have no theory of the world. In general, seeing that I have used diverse metaphysical and theological systems for literary objectives, readers have believed that I have professed those systems, when really all that I have done has been employ them for those ends, nothing more. Furthermore, if I had to define myself, it would be agnostic; that’s to say, someone who does not believe that knowledge is possible” (Vázquez: 107, my translation). “I have no personal system of philosophy. I never attempt to do that. I am merely a man of letters. In the same way, for example that—well, of course, I shouldn’t perhaps choose this as an example—in the same way that Dante used theology for the purpose of poetry, or Milton used theology for the purposes of his poetry, why shouldn’t I use philosophy, especially idealistic philosophy—philosophy to which I was attracted—for the purposes of writing a tale, of writing a story? I suppose that is allowable, no?” (Dutton: 339).
of the imagination. The child, consequently, lacks the robust powers of discernment between creatures of the flesh and creatures of fantasy, between “reality” and “imagination”, between what is “real” and what is “fictional”. And yet, can such a radical distinction be made? Is there such a visible delineation? Furthermore, would Borges himself present such a distinction? I have already attempted to address this question in an article concerning his insistence that Swedenborg’s accounts of otherworld journeys and his communication with angels, demons and the dead were “authentic”, and that Swedenborg was consequently a true mystic, whilst Dante’s visions were willed, rather than spontaneous, and were crafted for the purpose of his poetic cycle.\(^8\) Dante, consequently, was not a mystic. I argue that this perspective is highly problematic, not least for a poet like Borges, who repeatedly argued that fictional and poetic experiences are as real as “real” experiences, and that “real” experiences are in fact poetic and fictional:

I think of reading a book as no less an experience than traveling or falling in love. I think that reading Berkeley or Shaw or Emerson, those are quite as real experiences to me as seeing London, for example. Of course, I saw London through Dickens and through Chesterton and through Stevenson, no? Many people are apt to think of real life on the one side, that means toothache, headache, traveling and so on, and then you have on the other side, you have imaginary life and fancy and that means the arts. But I don’t think that that distinction holds water. I think that everything is a part of life.\(^9\)

It is also problematic as such a distinction divides visionary experience into willed or unwilled, hidden or unhidden, illusory or genuine. Such divisions present enormous challenges when appraised in light of the heterogeneous scholarship of mysticism (such as William Inge, William James, Evelyn Underhill, W. T. Stace, R. C. Zaehner, and Frits Staal), as one recurrent feature of the scholarship is the recognition that such categorical distinctions are inappropriate to a study of the rich, complex and contradictory traditions of mysticism. Furthermore, in Borges’ curious appraisal of Swedenborg and Dante, one must deduce that the daimonic forms encountered by Swedenborg exist in some undetermined ontological status, independent, as it were, of the subjective will of Swedenborg, whilst those encountered by the poet Dante are creations of his poetic fancy. Again, as I argue in the article, this is a remarkably problematic basis upon which to construct a hermeneutic of mystical texts.

\(^8\) See Rowlandson 2011.
Yet Borges was a mercurial character who, throughout his writing career, displayed a tension between a radical and deep-rooted scepticism and a fascination with and deep respect for religious, spiritual and mystical aspects of human experience. This respect, however, when married with his inveterate iconoclasm, mistrust of doctrine, and admiration of heresy, I would argue, made him defensive of being taken for credulous. For example, in a lecture on nightmares in Seven Nights, Borges criticises British anthropologist, folklorist, and classical scholar Sir James Frazer for being “extremely credulous, as it seems he believed everything reported by the various travellers.”\textsuperscript{10} As his numerous interviews and essays testify, Borges appeared to equate belief—whether religious, philosophical or even political—with a surrender of one’s intellect and faculty of critical enquiry. One senses in Borges that the religious faithful—especially Argentine Catholics—are somehow gullible. When evaluating a peculiar coincidence of dreams associated with Coleridge’s poem Kubla Khan, for example, Borges displays a defensive position: “Those who automatically reject the supernatural (I try, always, to belong to this group) will claim that the story of the two dreams is merely a coincidence, a chance delineation, like the outlines of lions or horses we sometimes see in the clouds”\textsuperscript{11}. This may sound like a straightforward comment, in which Borges maintains that the narrative similarities across time are merely coincidental and inconsequential, yet in the same text Borges rejects his declared materialist position to explore the more poetic, mysterious dimension of this parallel, arguing that his preferred explanation “is that the Emperor’s soul penetrated Coleridge’s, enabling Coleridge to rebuild the destroyed palace in words that would be more lasting than marble and metal”.\textsuperscript{12} He would reject \textit{a priori} the supernatural, and yet the explanation of the repeated vision of Kubla Khan he most favours is one of the transmigration of souls. Likewise he rejects this very notion of the transmigration of souls, yet he criticises the Spanish poet Quevedo for denying its possibility, arguing that Quevedo “merely a student of the truth, is invulnerable to that charm”.\textsuperscript{13} We find numerous instances in Borges’ essays and interviews in which he seeks the anomalous aspect of human experience before the strictly rational, and in which he appears to favour the supernatural whilst simultaneously disavowing it. He writes longingly in \textit{Imaginary Beings}, for example, about Stevenson’s accounts of receiving inspiration and fully-formed narratives, such as \textit{Strange Case

\textsuperscript{10} Borges 1984: 28.

\textsuperscript{11} Borges 1964: 16 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{12} Borges 1964: 16.

\textsuperscript{13} Borges 1964: 38.
of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, from the Brownies whom he encountered in his dreams and reveries:

Brownies are helpful little men of a brownish hue, which gives them their name. It is their habit to visit Scottish farms and, while the household sleeps, to perform domestic chores. One of the tales by the Grimms deals with the same subject. Robert Louis Stevenson said he had trained his Brownies in the craft of literature. Brownies visited him in his dreams and told him wondrous tales; for instance the strange transformation of Dr Jekyll into the diabolical Mr Hyde, and that episode of Olalla, in which the scion of an old Spanish family bites his sister’s hand.¹⁴

He cites Bede’s description of how Cædmon was first amongst poets, “because he did not learn from men, but from God”, and he adds, “Let us hope he met his angel again”.¹⁵ He writes in clear terms that he gave great credence to the possibility that nightmares might have a demonic origin, writing in the lecture on nightmares: “there is an idea of demonic origin, the idea of a demon who causes the nightmare. I believe it does not derive simply from a superstition. I believe that there is—and I speak with complete honesty and sincerity—something true in this idea”.¹⁶ Again we must ask, if he “automatically reject[ed] the supernatural” then how does one reconcile his inclination towards demons and the demonic origin of nightmares?

Likewise, and despite his scepticism, Borges appeared keen to accept the muse-like source of many of his poems and tales, describing receiving poems and plots fully fledged in his reveries. For example, he described how the poem “The White Deer” came to him in its entirety in a dream: “I don’t feel that I wrote that poem […] I physically dictated the words. The poem was given to me, in a dream, some minutes before dawn. At times dreams are painful and tedious, and I object to their outrage and say, enough, this is only a dream, stop. But this time it was an oral picture that I saw and heard. I simply copied it, exactly as it was given to me.”¹⁷ He recalled that El Hacedor [Dreamtigers] was his favourite book “because it wrote itself.”¹⁸ He described in other interviews that sonnets appeared to enter his conscious mind from some source beyond consciousness; he discussed dreams and nightmares as being given to him for the purpose of

¹⁵ Borges 1964: 16.
¹⁶ Borges 1984: 32.
¹⁷ Barnstone 2000: 30.
making poetry; and he repeatedly suggested the divine or demonic source of dreams and nightmares.

This tension between a strong sense of religiosity and a deep-rooted scepticism should not, in my judgment, be considered awkward or insoluble. I would argue, on the contrary, that it is precisely this tension that creates the intellectual drive to explore the deeper mysteries of human experience without losing the necessary critical faculty to return to daylight and evaluate the experience. It is, in this sense, a tension fully observable in C. G. Jung. Jung underwent a period of psychic crisis in his thirties, yet kept secret the harrowing accounts of his experience with the unconscious entities and the discarnate dead, documenting them in great majesty in the Liber Novus which he never published.\(^{19}\) He was aware that his experiences constituted a radical discord with the ontological certainties held by himself and the wider public, and he was fully cognisant of the ridicule that he would face amongst friends and peers if he claimed that he conversed with Old Testament prophets and with the dead. Even as late as 1958, his essay on UFOs concentrates almost entirely in evaluating the “psychic cause” and “psychic effect” of the phenomenon, and not the phenomenon itself. Jung was emphatic about the critical distance maintained through scientific objectivity, which permitted him, like Borges, to explore with great enthusiasm all manner of alchemical, gnostic, mystical, hermetic and occult texts without abandoning robust “empiricism”. Whilst Borges may have stressed that his interest lay in “the merely aesthetic”, Jung would argue that his interest was in the psychological aspect of these systems of thought. Yet it becomes apparent through a scrutiny of Jung’s work that he felt torn between his desire to be a scientist and his inclination towards philosophy, theology and metaphysics as maps not only of the human psyche, but of reality itself. That is to say that his concerns were not merely epistemological but also ontological. This is evident in his strident riposte as footnote in his work on UFOs: “It is a common and totally unjustified misunderstanding on the part of scientifically trained people to say that I regard the psychic background as something ‘metaphysical’, while on the other hand the theologians accuse me of ‘psychologizing’ metaphysics. Both are wide of the mark: I am an empiricist, who keeps within the boundaries set for him by the theory of knowledge”.\(^{20}\) There is so much to be elucidated from this, especially given the arbitrary nature of the terms employed, such as “empiricist” and “theory of knowledge”. Jung was obviously pulled between intuition and rationality, and even when he did consider the ontological possibility of

\(^{19}\) It was eventually published in 2009 as The Red Book.

\(^{20}\) Jung 1958: 328.
the UFO (in the final chapter of his investigation, where he discusses UFOs appearing on radar screens) he concentrated not on the phenomenon itself, but on the psychic response to it and the projection of psychic energy upon it.

In a similar fashion, Borges would argue that his interests lay purely in their aesthetic value, as if that negates any speculation about the actual questions raised in metaphysics, psychology (and parapsychology) and religious and mystical texts. Yet both Borges and Jung were clearly deeply drawn to such liminal and mysterious levels of human experience, and their safety lines in these dark caves were literature and psychology respectively. The publication of The Red Book has inspired a fresh approach to Jung, an approach hinted at since early publications of Von Franz, Jaffé, Hannah, Jacobi and others, but rarely stated outright: that Jung did consider such matters at their ontological level.\(^{21}\) The parallel drawn with Jung here illustrates a perplexing dialogue between polarities present in Borges. I am not assuming that an equivalent Red Book—a secret illuminated manuscript of Borges’ encounters with the dead—will be unearthed and published to corroborate such a position. I would argue that such a discovery is not necessary; the published work of Borges—poems, tales, essay, reviews and interviews—is replete with subtle indications that he, like Jung, was fascinated with and touched by the more

\(^{21}\) Aniela Jaffé’s essay “Was C. G. Jung a mystic?” (1989) focuses from the opening page on the tension between Jung’s mystic sensibilities and his insistence on principles of empiricism, observing that Jung reacted strongly against any claims that he was anything other than a scientific observer. Gary Lachman’s recent Jung the Mystic (2010), as the title suggests, testifies to the mystical nature of Jung, and he appraises with sensitivity the double nature present in Jung: “Jung seemed to have two minds about the supernatural: a public one that wanted to understand it “scientifically,” and a private one that acknowledged ghosts, visions, and premonitions as part of the essential mystery of life” (4). Lachman also cites Anthony Storr, who writes in his book Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus that ‘Jung was a guru’ (in Lachman: 6). Jungian analyst Roger Woolger, in his review of Jung’s Red Book (Woolger’s final publication prior to his death in 2011), declared outright that Jung displayed all the characteristics commonly associated with shamans, calling Jung “the Hidden Shaman”: “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 us 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” (2011: 4-5).
anomalous aspects of human experience at a level beyond the “mere aesthetic”.

We return, therefore, to the matter of imaginary beings, and here a personal account may help to frame my question. My reading of mysticism, accounts of daimonic encounters, Jung, Borges and Swedenborg over the past two years has paralleled questions posed by my young daughter on a near-nightly basis. When we read of fairies, goblins, elves, fairy godmothers, monsters, witches, wizards or even children (especially children), she invariably asks me “but are they real?” My response is normally to ask her what she means. “Real like you and me,” she answers; “can we see them? Where are they?” I have on occasions told her that her question is precisely what I have been wrestling with all day when considering Borges’ accounts of Swedenborg’s angels or Terence McKenna’s accounts of “self-transforming machine elves”, but that response leaves her cold. “Well,” I hesitate, “they are real in the book, and they may be real in your dreams.” “Yes, but are they real?” “Well. Yes and no…” “But why have I never seen a fairy? It’s not fair!” Such questions are remarkably hard to answer, as whilst the voice of our education urges us to answer “of course fairies are not real. Don’t be ridiculous. They’re just make-believe!” the voice of experience and intuition (plus the autodidact aspect of our education) encourages us to see that such a categorical distinction is neither possible nor helpful. When Borges, for example, insists on the authenticity of Swedenborg’s heavenly voyages, by implication he assumes a genuine encounter with autonomously existent angels. When he writes in his early essay “A History of Angels” that “We must not be too prodigal with our angels; they are the last divinities we harbor, and they might fly away” does the pathetic quality to the text suggest that for him angels were something more than mere poetic tropes?

Borges paid close attention to the otherworld journeys of Swedenborg, to his communication with angels, demons and the discarnate souls of the dead. However, as indicated earlier, Borges’ division of poets into mystics and non-mystics is problematic as it implies a primacy of unwilled imagination over conscious imaginings: “I wonder if Fray Luis de León had any mystical experience. I should say not. When I talk of mystics, I think of Swedenborg, Angelus Silesius, and the Persians also. Not the Spaniards. I don’t think they had any mystical experiences [...]. I think that Saint John of the Cross was following the pattern of the Song of Songs. And that’s that. I suppose he never had any actual

experience.”

“Pascal is not a mystic; he belongs to those Christians, denounced by Swedenborg, who suppose that heaven is a reward and hell a punishment and who, accustomed to melancholy meditation, do not know how to speak with the angels.” What is visible in these and other comments is that Borges praised Swedenborg as the epitome of the mystic because of his lucid accounts of otherworld realities and his regular communication with angels. *Real* angels, he would appear to suggest, cannot be consciously imagined for the purpose of a poetic text, however beautiful, such as the *Divine Comedy*. Angels are encountered unbidden. Such a position is in line with an overall model of mysticism that may be assembled from a reading of Borges’ varied works, in which the mystical vision is necessarily *received* and not induced, a perspective conforming to the category of mysticism defined by William James as “passive”.

Borges repeatedly defended Swedenborg against charges of insanity, arguing that the man was remarkably lucid, that his works were the product of a profoundly intellectual mind, that they were categorically *not* art or poetry, but the accounts of voyages, charts of the unknown lands of heavens and hells like one of his Viking ancestors exploring the Arctic waters. “Swedenborg,” writes Borges, “is the first explorer of the other world. An explorer we should take seriously.” Elsewhere he declares: “No one was less like a monk than that sanguine Scandinavian who went much farther than Erik the Red”.

Swedenborg was thus neither poetically creative nor delusional. Nor, importantly was he talking in riddles, parables or allegories, but was recording his observations directly:

The use of any word whatsoever presupposes a shared experience, for which the word is the symbol. If someone speaks to us about the flavor of coffee, it is because we have already tasted it; if about the color yellow, because we have already seen lemons, gold, wheat, and sunsets. To suggest the ineffable union of man’s soul with the divine being, the Sufis of Islam found themselves obliged to resort to prodigious analogies, to images of roses, intoxication, or carnal love. Swedenborg was able to abstain from this kind of rhetorical artifice because his subject matter was not the ecstasy of a rapt and fainting soul but, rather, the accurate description of regions that, though ultra-terrestrial, were clearly defined. In order for us to imagine, or to begin to imagine, the lowest depth of hell, John Milton

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speaks to us of ‘No light, but rather darkness visible.’ Swedenborg prefers the rigor—and why not say it?—possible wordiness of the explorer or geographer who is recording unknown kingdoms.  

A conundrum lies at the heart of Borges’ interpretation of Swedenborg that is reflected in his wider study of “imaginary beings”. Swedenborg’s journeys constituted verification of a location on a plane equivalent to the Greenland of Eric the Red. The angels and demons thus constitute autonomous entities equivalent to the Inuit. And yet, Borges argues elsewhere, angels are creatures of the imagination whose existence is determined precisely through the creative imaginative process. Borges concludes his “History of Angels”:

Here we arrive at the near miracle that is the true motive for this writing: what we might call the survival of the angel. The human imagination has pictured a horde of monsters (tritons, hippogriffs, chimeras, sea serpents, unicorns, devils, dragons, werewolves, cyclopes, fauns, basilisks, demigods, leviathans, and a legion of others) and all have disappeared, except angels. Today, what line of poetry would dare allude to the phoenix or make itself the promenade of a centaur? None; but no poetry, however modern, is unhappy to be a nest of angels and to shine brightly with them.  

The poet thus ensures the survival of the angel through creating the poem; yet Swedenborg was no poet, Borges assures us. Such a curious dichotomy concerning the ontological status of the angels and other daemonic beings is present throughout Imaginary Beings, where the first division, as we have seen, is between the creatures of a zoo and the creatures of the imagination. In this respect the zebra is radically distinct from the goblin, and although the child may not readily distinguish them, the process of education would ensure that the division is made apparent. Of course, Borges reminds us, beasts can straddle this division and exist both empirically as members of the animal kingdom that the child visits in the zoo and also within the imagination. “We believe in the lion as reality and symbol,” whilst other beasts are purely creatures of myth and fantasy: “we believe in the Minotaur as symbol but no longer as reality”.  

His second division would appear to be between those beings whose appearance is subject to the vicissitudes of the moment and who thus leave little cultural record, and those who have persisted over the centuries in the  

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29 Borges 2000: 19. It is interesting to note that these “monsters” from Borges’ essay of 1926 all later appear in Imaginary Beings.  
human imagination. In this respect, there are creatures born of the moment for the purpose of fulfilling a fictional role—such as H. G. Wells’ *Eloi* and *Morlocks* (who appear as entries in *Imaginary Beings*)—and those whose universality has granted them some archetypal status. “We tend to think,” for example, “that in the Platonic world of ideas there is an archetype of the centaur as there is of the horse or the man”.\(^{31}\) We would not, he suggests by implication, imagine such an archetype of the Eloi. This is similarly the case with fairies, angels and dragons; they are “necessary monsters”. “We are as ignorant of the meaning of the dragon as we are of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon’s image that appeals to the human imagination, and so we find the dragon in quite distinct places and times. It is, so to speak, a necessary monster, not an ephemeral or accidental one, such as the three-headed chimera or catoblepas”.\(^{32}\) The dragon, like the angel in his early essay, requires the ever-renewed investment of creative human imagination in order to maintain its existence. Should this interest fade, so fades the dragon; indeed, he suggests, the persistence of the dragon in our imagination owes, in part, to the fact that it sits uneasily on both sides of the primary division of “real” and “imaginary”: “People believed in the reality of the Dragon. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the Dragon is recorded in Conrad Gesture’s *Historia Animalium*, a work of scientific nature”.\(^{33}\) However—and here Borges’ poetic sensibilities guide his perspective—the repeated appearance of the dragon in fantasy-drenched fairy tales in recent times has impoverished its nature:

> Time has notably worn away the Dragon’s prestige. We believe in the lion as reality and symbol; we believe in the Minotaur as symbol but no longer as reality. The Dragon is perhaps the best known but also the least fortunate of the fantastic animals. It seems childish to us and usually spoils the stories in which it appears. It is worth remembering, however, that we are dealing with a modern prejudice, due perhaps to a surfeit of Dragons in fairy tales.\(^{34}\)

Belief in the dragon ennobles it. Lack of belief destroys it. But how to define and conceptualise belief? This is a question that brings us back to the prime division of “real” and “imaginary”, external and internal, empirical and fantastical. These are all divisions which for Borges the poet were, as we have seen, notably hard to define.

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A third division of the imaginary beasts may be perceived. Borges writes of the centaur and recounts how “the cavalry of the conquistadors were Centaurs to the Indians” (and he cites Prescott’s description of the fear that the indigenous people experienced upon seeing this man-beast split into two and both parts continuing to live). He concludes with the statement that: “the Greeks, unlike the Indians, were familiar with the horse; it is more likely that the Centaur was a deliberate invention and not a confusion born of ignorance”.\textsuperscript{35} Borges thus makes a distinction between entities “deliberately” invented and those invented through some delusion arising from fear. In this respect the beastie under the bed of the child with nightmares is different from the beastie imagined by an author. As with the other distinctions articulated above, this particular assertion is also problematic, as surely the beastie under the bed that frightens the child may have been encountered in fiction.

It becomes clear from further comments in \textit{Imaginary Beings} and in his other work that Borges established a firmly psychological understanding of imaginary beings, based in no small measure on his reading of Jung, and that the division outlined above bears no ontological implication about the nature of angels or unicorns. Borges was a close reader of Jung, and refers to his works on many occasions (see Rowlandson 2012). He discusses in \textit{Imaginary Beings}, for example, Jung’s treatment of the symbol of the unicorn: “The Holy Ghost, Jesus Christ, mercury, and evil have all been represented by the Unicorn. In his \textit{Psychologie und Alchemie} (1944), Jung gives a history and an analysis of these symbols”.\textsuperscript{36} He also discusses Jung’s treatment of the symbol of the Uroboros: “Uroboros (Greek for ‘the one that devours its tail’) is the learned name of this creature which became the symbol adopted by alchemists in the Middle Ages. The curious may read further in Jung’s study \textit{Psychologie und Alchemie}”.\textsuperscript{37} He also mentions Jung’s reflection on the composition of the dragon: “Jung observes that in the dragon are the reptile and the bird—the elements of earth and air”.\textsuperscript{38} I feel that it is through an understanding of Borges’ essentially psychological dimension of imaginary beings that we can grapple with his overall treatment of the mystical and the daimonic.

Jung wrote on many occasions about the \textit{daimon} and the \textit{daimons}, and some distinction may be made between the singular and the plural. The daimon, for Jung, was the creative force associated with psychic energy or \textit{libido}. In \textit{Memories, Dreams, Reflections} he reflects on the creative

\textsuperscript{35} Borges 1987: 38.
\textsuperscript{36} Borges 1987: 147.
\textsuperscript{37} Borges 1987: 150.
\textsuperscript{38} Borges 1987: 154.
daimon that propelled him ever onward in quest of knowledge, and often estranged him from people, giving rise to enemies: “The daimon of creativity has ruthlessly had its way with me.”

Jung’s writings on the daimon are not easily translated into an evaluation of elves and goblins, as for Jung the daimon is a personal unconscious figure whom we must learn to acknowledge and even befriend in the process of individuation so as to prevent its powerful force operating upon us unconsciously. As he describes in MDR, only by identifying this daimonic power and collaborating with it was Jung able to receive its mighty energy which propelled him on his quest for knowledge; and yet in his early writing he recognised this autonomous authority of the unconscious daimon and acknowledged that the same daimon often threatened to overpower him: “The daimon throws us down, makes us traitors to our ideals and cherished convictions—traitors to the selves we thought we were”. The daimon was the name he gave to the singular presence within his psyche which he felt operated beyond the control of his own ego, and which influenced his conscious choices unconsciously. In this respect, as he describes, the daimon may be considered synonymous with the unconscious:

I prefer the term ‘the unconscious’, knowing that I might equally well speak of ‘God’ or ‘daimon’ if I wished to express myself in mythic language. When I do use such mythic language, I am aware that ‘mana,’ ‘daimon,’ and ‘God’ are synonyms for the unconscious—that is to say, we know just as much or just as little about them as about the latter.

The plural daimons appear in Jung’s analysis less as the archetypal principle within the psyche such as the “god” or single “daimon”, and more as un-integrated and untamed aspects of the unconscious that operate at the dark margins of our ego. In this respect they are conceptually related to complexes. Referring to the medieval idea of the daimonic, Jung writes that “demons are nothing other than intruders from the unconscious, spontaneous irruptions of the unconscious complexes into the continuity of the conscious process. Complexes are comparable to demons which fitfully harass our thought and actions; hence in antiquity and the Middle Ages acute neurotic disturbances were conceived as possession”.

Whilst, as visible in his essay on UFOs, Jung was ever cautious about speculating on the material nature of psychoid entities—a speculation that

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40 Jung 1956: 357.
might lead to the suggestion that ghosts, apparitions and daimons may be somehow beyond the psyche—nevertheless, as is clear from the complex text of The Red Book, he was deeply concerned about the possibility that the dead who visited him were something more than aspects of his unconscious. When in dialogue with Elijah and Salome, Jung declares: “I can hardly reckon you as being part of my soul [...] Therefore I must separate you and Salome from my soul and place you among the daimons. You are connected to what is primordially old and always exists, therefore you also know nothing of the being with men but simply of the past and future”.\textsuperscript{43} Such is the autonomous nature of Salome and Elijah that when Jung confronts them and suggests that “You are the symbol of the most extreme contradiction”, Elijah retorts: “We are real and not symbols”.\textsuperscript{44} Later, Elijah returns to this matter and explains: “You may call us symbols for the same reason that you can also call your fellow men symbols, if you wish to. But we are just as real as your fellow men. You invalidate nothing and solve nothing by calling us symbols”.\textsuperscript{45} Nothing is clear in this most challenging of texts, and one of the most puzzling dilemmas is that which Jung, and by extension the reader, felt when confronted with figures of such overwhelming autonomy; that they appear extrinsic to the psyche of the individual. In this sense, Jung asks whether he dreamt of his dead father or whether his father visited him in his dreams.\textsuperscript{46} Stephani Stephens’ close reading of The Red Book identifies a curious distinction between figures of the unconscious and the discarnate dead, in that there is no transference of psychic energy between the living and the dead, whilst libido transference occurs through communication with the daimonic figures of the unconscious, such as Philemon.\textsuperscript{47} Much may be made of these perplexing matters, but space limits further exploration in this essay.

\textsuperscript{43} Jung 2009: 357. I am indebted to Stephani Stephens’ authoritative doctoral study of The Red Book for many of the ideas about figures appearing within or beyond the unconscious in The Red Book.

\textsuperscript{44} Jung 2009: 246.

\textsuperscript{45} Jung 2009: 249.

\textsuperscript{46} Jung likewise dreamt of his departed wife Emma and raised the same questions, as did Von Franz when she dreamt of her deceased father. It was clearly a question central to Jung and his associates.

\textsuperscript{47} Stephens analyses this knotty question: “The dead are different. As discarnate souls they present themselves to Jung with an autonomy of libido, which presumably is not meant to and never will be released to Jung for integration into his personality. Often, the conversational exchange does not so obviously reveal an oppositional attitude, as with other figures of the unconscious, and although Jung identifies the dead too, as vanishing and disappearing after the conclusion of an exchange, this does not serve as confirmation that they have been integrated into
Without being drawn into these conundrums of energy transference, what is important here is to speculate on the nature of daimonic forms as figures of the unconscious or, in Borges’ terms, “creatures of the imagination”, and to ask whether such definitions are in any way limitations? The question is succinctly framed by Terence McKenna at the start of one of the Trialogues with Rupert Sheldrake and Ralph Abraham entitled “Entities”. McKenna launches into the discussion with three essential possibilities concerning the ontology of daimonic beings: firstly empirical beasts which “are rare, but physical, and [...] have identities somewhere between the coelacanths and Bigfoot. They potentially could be imagined moving from the realm of mythology into the realm of established zoological fact”. 48 In this respect, akin to the description of the platypus in the eighteenth century, 49 they are preternatural rather than supernatural in the sense that the scientific method of empirical and testable analysis will at some stage solve this particular mystery. Thankfully, McKenna dismisses this first possibility as unsustainable.

The second option that lies before us when we look at the ontological status of these entities is what I would think of as the Jungian position. To demonstrate it, I’ll simply quote Jung on the subject of sprites and elementals. He calls them ‘autonomous fragments of psychic energy that have temporarily escaped from the controlling power of the ego.’ 50 This is what I would call the mentalist reductionist approach to discarnate entities and intelligences. It says that they are somehow part and parcel of our own minds, their existence dependent upon our conceiving them as objects in our imagination, however pathologically expressed. 51

McKenna, though, is dismissive of this possibility on the grounds that that ascribing to the entities a derivation from the human psyche would appear to limit what for him were astonishingly other beings.

The third and obviously most interesting possibility, but the one fraught with argumentative pitfalls, is that these entities are (1) nonphysical and (2) autonomous in their existence in some sense. In other words, they actually carry on an existence independent of their being perceived by human beings. This is the classical position of those who have had the largest

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48 McKenna 2001: 93.
49 Zollschan et al.: ν.
50 McKenna was citing Jung from memory, and may have been referring to the citation above from Psychological Types.
51 McKenna 2001: 94.
amount of experience dealing with these entities: the shamans, ecstacies, and so-called sensitive types.\footnote{52}

This is the most radical and challenging position which, as we have seen, was of great concern to Jung. In this respect, there is a link back to McKenna’s first hypothesis, in the sense that were such entities so categorically autonomous then, with the appropriate tools or techniques of observation, science could, indeed, identify and classify them. This matter is consequently fraught with the problems of assessing quite which tools or techniques might be employed. McKenna, true to his philosophy, would assert that the tools available to everyone are psychedelics—especially psilocybin, by which the “logos” entity may be experienced, and DMT, by which the elves may be encountered.\footnote{53} And yet, a synthesis of McKenna’s first and third hypothesis would appear to diminish the role of the second, psychological, hypothesis. Based upon a reading of Borges, Jung and McKenna, the position becomes ever more compelling that daimonic entities are better appraised as a synthesis of McKenna’s second and third postulates. In this respect the entities are not so much created by the imagination as encountered through the imagination, and this encounter is the result of a creative process which gives form and context to a formless daimonic force. In this respect the daimonic beings do operate autonomously and consciously, but the location of encounter is the creative imagination. They are figures of the unconscious insofar as it is through the deeper strata of the unconscious that they may be encountered. The importance of this hypothesis is the emphasis on the imagination as a mode of perception as opposed to a mode of mere fantasy, and as a result the full impact of Borges’ stress on “imaginary beings” is highlighted. The Brownies were as much aspects of Stevenson’s psyche as they were aspects of material reality, as at the deeper levels of the unconscious—in dreams, visions, reveries—the psyche and material reality are interwoven. This is the physis-psyché conjunction that Jung described as the psychoid.\footnote{54}

This hypothesis is at the heart of all that we have discussed above regarding Borges, Jung and McKenna. As McKenna suggests, “these entities are nonphysical”, and yet they are “autonomous in their existence in some sense”. This is a compelling statement when correlated with the

\footnote{52} McKenna 2001: 94. 
\footnote{54} “Since psyche and matter are contained in one and the same world, and moreover are in continuous contact with one another and ultimately rest on irreprehensible, transcendental factors, it is not only possible but fairly probable, even, that psyche and matter are two different aspects of one and the same thing” (Jung 1974: 5).
encounters with entities reported by experimenters with ayahuasca or pure DMT, as so many of the trip reports indicate not only the experience of entities, but, importantly, entities of such solidity, intelligence and autonomy that the subject simply cannot accept having been the author of such beings. David Luke writes:

Perhaps one of the most striking, common and unique features of the DMT or ayahuasca experience is the encounter with seemingly sentient discarnate beings, which are often described as being more real than anything previously experienced (Cott & Rock, 2008). Commonly they were described as ‘entities’, ‘beings’, ‘aliens’, ‘guides’ or ‘helpers’, and would appear as something like “clowns, reptiles, mantises, bees, spiders, cacti, and stick figures” (Strassman, 2001: 185), as well as dwarfs, elves, imps, angels, spirits, gods, or just as a presence, the latter four of which were commonly supremely powerful, wise, and loving.

Is this not the landscape of Borges’ and Guerrero’s Book of Imaginary Beings, where monsters and devils share the pages with fairies and angels? What value is there in asserting that Wells invented his aliens whilst Swedenborg encountered his angels? Would it not be a more fruitful suggestion that Wells encountered his “fictional” entities through the creative process just as Swedenborg gave form to the angels through the power of the creative imagination? Henry Corbin’s exploration of the mundus imaginalis does justice to this perspective, as does Patrick Harpur’s compelling and poetic treatment of daimonic beings in Daimonic Reality, in which the daimons are substantiated in the garb of the culture in which they appear—and as such the Wee Folk robed in leaves and acorns are traditionally encountered in the rural Celtic Fringe, whilst hi-tech shiny “Greys” are reported in the space-age, nuclear-age, landscape of modernity. Tolkien and Wells give form to archetypal daimonic energies in their creation of Hobbits, Wargs, or futuristic humanoids, just as the Irish farmer gives form to archetypal daimonic energies in his vision of Leprechaun. None is mere fantasy yet all are fantastic. None is mere fiction yet all are the stuff of legends.

As discussed, the fictional/poetic space for Borges may be considered as an epistemological order akin to Corbin’s mundus imaginalis—the imaginal. Whilst this is a dominant aspect of his philosophy of aesthetics, nevertheless Borges muddies the hermeneutic waters by emphasising the “reality” of Swedenborg’s visions against the “poetic unreality” of Dante’s.

56 Luke: 34.
57 Harpur: 275-286.
Borges anticipates the expected reader reaction to the works of Swedenborg when he defends him against charges of madness. This is because when we read certain passages in Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell*, we are presented with the cognitive challenge of accepting the strength of his visions. Swedenborg writes: “When I have been allowed to be in the company of angels, I have seen what was there exactly the way I see things in our world, so perceptibly that I did not know I was not in our world and in the court of some king here. I have also talked with angels just as one person here talks to another”. The alternative to delusion, hallucination or poetic fancy is that Swedenborg’s angelic realm is of an order equivalent to an undiscovered island in the Pacific, or a tribal community hidden in the rain forest—*de carne y hueso* [of flesh and blood]. Borges, synthesising numerous passages from *Arcana Cœlestia* and *Heaven and Hell*, assures us that this is not so, and that “The heaven and hell of his doctrine are not places, even though the souls of the dead who inhabit and, in a way, create them perceive them as being situated in space. They are conditions of the soul, determined by its former life”. The location (for want of a better word), therefore, of Swedenborg’s heavens and hells is neither “real” nor “merely fictional”. They are, as Borges suggests “conditions of the soul” and thus correspond to the Imagination of Blake and Coleridge, to Corbin’s *imaginal*, to Jung’s dreamworld, as liminal spaces which are neither one nor the other. Kathleen Raine lucidly describes this threshold state: “For the landscapes of poetry, the landscapes of the great painters are not to be found in nature at all. […] They are landscapes of the soul, and the imagery is not an end but a means—a language for discoursing upon realities of the intelligible world, not of the physical world. The theme of imaginative art is not physical but metaphysical”. It must be emphasised that Swedenborg did not physically walk out of his door and into a parallel universe populated with angels and demons, but neither was he “making it up” in the sense that a novelist might create a fiction. This is a difficult idea to conceive

58 Swedenborg: para. 174.
60 Raine 2007: 25.
61 Perhaps, however, his voyages were of such a physical order. Swedenborg writes in *Heaven and Hell*: “As to being carried away by the spirit to another place, I have been shown by living experience what it is, and how it is done, but only two or three times. I will relate a single instance. Walking through the streets of a city and through fields, talking at the same time with spirits, I knew no otherwise than that I was fully awake, and in possession of my usual sight. Thus I walked on without going astray, and all the while with clear vision, seeing groves, rivers, palaces, houses, men, and other objects. But after walking thus for some hours,
of, let alone describe, and yet Corbin succeeds in defining the *imaginal* as, precisely, this liminal landscape that has characterised religious and mystical experience (both in Christianity and Islam), poetry and art, across time and cultures; and Swedenborg was for Corbin of supreme importance, in the same way that he was for Borges. This whole dimension of the *imaginal* is difficult to apprehend cognitively, as it can only be described in terms that create a sense of contradiction—neither real nor fantasy yet both real and fantasy. Czeslaw Milosz, whose essay on Swedenborg is published alongside Borges’ in Lawrence’s *Testimony to the Invisible*, examines the complex nature of the *imaginal* with regards Dante, Blake and Swedenborg:

Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is modeled on Swedenborg, and he would have been amused by an inquiry into whether he had ‘really’ seen the devils and angels he describes. The crux of the problem—and a serious challenge to the mind—is Blake’s respect for both the imagination of Dante, who was a poet, and the imagination of Swedenborg, whose works are written in quite pedestrian Latin prose. Dante was regarded by his contemporaries as a man who had visited the other world. Yet Jaspers would not have called him a schizophrenic, because the right of the poet to invent—that is, to lie—was recognized in Jaspers’s lifetime as something obvious. It is not easy to grasp the consequences of the aesthetic theories which have emerged as the flotsam and jetsam of the scientific and technological revolution. The pressure of habit still forces us to exclaim: ‘Well then, Swedenborg wrote fiction and he was aware it was no more than fiction!’ But, tempting as it is, the statement would be false. Neither Swedenborg nor Blake were aestheticians; they did not enclose the spiritual within the domain of art and poetry and oppose it to the material. At the risk of simplifying the issue by using a definition, let us say rather that they both were primarily concerned with the *energy* that reveals itself in a constant interaction of Imagination with the things perceived by our five senses.62

Milosz seizes the nettle in a manner that would chime with Jung in suggesting that the principle force operating on both Dante and Swedenborg was not a putative “authenticity” of experience, but the energy of the

numinous encounter with angels through the creative imagination. No amount of ontological speculation should blind us to the fact that all experience of the daimonic is an encounter with the numinous; and such encounters, as Jung so often wrote, provide the psychic energy that fuels the process of individuation.

In an appraisal of Borges’ many writings, it becomes evident that he read extensively and sympathetically in the traditions of mystical, spiritual and esoteric texts. Surely there is a limit to the capacity of a reader to explore such texts to the extent that Borges did if, ultimately, the reader is not predisposed towards them? Borges, like Jung, was a reader of alchemical texts, dramatising, for example, the aged figure of Paracelsus in one of his final tales “The Rose of Paracelsus”. He maintained a lifelong interest in daimonic beings, hermetic philosophy, neoplatonism, esoteric societies, Gnosticism, anomalies in time, the persistence of the soul after death, eschatology and depth psychology. He was likewise a devoted reader of Angelus Silesius, and translated Silesius’ challenging Cherubinischer Wandersmann with Maria Kodama. He was a dedicated reader of Dante, William Blake and Sufi poets. He was also a reader of Theosophy, describing his surprise at being unable to find the works of Swedenborg in Theosophical bookshops, a statement which would imply that he frequented them. He made many references to William James, Jung, Rudolph Steiner and the later works of Aldous Huxley. I would argue that it is difficult to make meaningful statements about James, Jung, Steiner, or Huxley without entering their challenging works with energy, sympathy and an experiential mode of enquiry. He cites Ouspensky, a perplexing writer whose works are difficult to summarise based on only a rudimentary reading. Likewise, as discussed, Borges read Swedenborg

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63 “That Borges’ work demonstrates certain Gnostic leanings and concepts is well-documented, but it is generally ignored in deconstructive criticism’s haste to erase the logos in the name of its own brand of indeterminacy and deferral. It is much fairer to view Borges’ Gnosticism, particularly his affinity for the ‘malevolent demiurge’ who creates an imperfect universe, as his own attempt to work through the concerns of theodicy, and his sense of the inadequacy of orthodox religions’ efforts to do so” (Soud: 748).

64 “I know that in the National Library there is an edition of Heaven and Hell. But you will not find Swedenborg’s works in Theosophical bookshops” (Borges 2005: 202, my translation).

65 Ouspensky is also a name generally associated with Gurdjieff, a particularly curious guru figure of the twentieth century whose influence was felt upon writers, painters, film directors, philosophers and even politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. Whilst James Webb (1987: 492) writes that Borges attended a Gurdjieff group in Argentina, he provides no evidence. And whilst Gurdjieff scholar Sophia
with great devotion, and died with the project still unrealised of writing an entire book on Swedenborg’s voyages to the heavens and hells.

There is a tendency within Borges scholarship to accept Borges’ own claims of “merely aesthetic” interest in the more anomalous aspects of human experience and thus to treat merely as fictions his textual explorations of such matters. As such, no scholar that I have encountered has even mentioned, let alone explored, the two extraordinary passages in Borges’ whimsical late volume *Atlas*, in which he recounts his communication with the dead: “Asleep, in my dreams, I see or converse with the dead. None of these things surprises me in the least”.66 “Haydée Lange and I were conversing in a restaurant in the center of town. […] All of a sudden, I remembered that Haydée Lange had died a long time ago. She was a ghost and didn’t know it. I felt no fear, but felt it would not be right, and perhaps rude, to reveal to her that she was a ghost, a lovely ghost”.67 Were any scholar to consider these brief texts, it is likely that they would consider them simply fictions and therefore of no wider import. Yet from his early years, Borges reported mystical “timeless” experiences, lucid dreams, and the presence of ancestral voices. Were such statements of communication with the dead to have appeared in a diary, or an interview, undoubtedly they would not be dismissed as mere poetic fancy. Most likely they would be dismissed as delusion or hallucination. My argument would be that, as with Jung and his encounters with Philemon and the wandering dead, it was the highly developed imaginative powers of Borges that enabled him to experience these more mysterious encounters. The poetic and fictional craft that Borges mastered throughout his life constituted an ongoing practice of what Jung would describe as Active Imagination, and thus fictional encounters and dream encounters are brought together in the deeper psychoid levels of the unconscious.

Wellbeloved attests that Borges attended meetings on Gurdjieff’s *Work* in Buenos Aires, I can find no evidence that Borges read Gurdjieff: “Jorge Luis Borges is said to have attended meetings in Argentina in the 1950s. By then Gurdjieff’s influence was widespread in South America” (xxvii). It would seem likely that his knowledge of Ouspensky’s works would guarantee him at least a passing knowledge of Gurdjieff.

66 Borges 1985: 54.
Bibliography


