

UCLA

Mester

Title

The Process of Individuation in José Agustín' s *Cerca del fuego*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0cm2b5km>

Journal

Mester, 21(1)

Author

Schaffer, Susan C.

Publication Date

1992

DOI

10.5070/M3211014181

Copyright Information

Copyright 1992 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

The Process of Individuation in José Agustín's *Cerca del fuego*

Mexico's political repression of 1968, which culminated in the massacre of over three hundred people at Tlatelolco on October 2, unleashed a seismic wave that rocked the nation's social and economic institutions. The events of 68 also radically altered the course of contemporary Mexican letters. Immediately prior to this pivotal year, much of Mexico's narrative was naively euphoric and carefree in tone. But following the crisis, a dramatic affective shift occurred in this fiction. Expressions of futility, betrayal and impotence became commonplace in the works of authors writing in the wake of the debacle.¹ José Agustín, in his recent chronicle of cultural trends, *La tragicomedia mexicana*, calls this period in Mexico "un 'parteaguas' en la vida nacional, el hecho más importante de nuestra historia después de la revolución de 1910" (262). In a 1987 interview he elaborated further:

Yo creo que el 68 es decisivo en México. Fue el gran cambio . . . [que] motivó una profunda revolución cultural . . . En el 68 se dejó atrás una visión absolutamente caduca de la realidad, y se empezó a penetrar en la realidad con ojos diferentes. (Teichman 65)

Although the change from blind optimism to soul-searching pessimism can be traced in the fiction of numerous Mexican writers, the literary evolution of José Agustín provides us with one of the best illustrations of this phenomenon. Several critics, including Lucía Guerra-Cunningham and Mario A. Rojas, have studied this transition in Agustín's storytelling and demonstrated that the principle underlying his post-Tlatelolco literature is the tension between two forces: the Apollonian and the Dionysiac. However, the personal and intellectual struggle that is so transparent in works such as *Se está haciendo tarde* and *El rey se acerca a su templo* takes a significant turn in the Mexican's 1986 novel *Cerca del fuego*. In this text, José Agustín attempts to consummate a resolution

of opposing elements—a coalescence of light and darkness—by following Jungian paths of discovery.

In 1968, prompted by the tragic collapse of the student movement, José Agustín made a conscious decision to embark on a quest for self-renewal and integration. Using October 2 as a reference point, the novelist described his fractured psyche and the steps he would take to heal it:

Yo pensaba todavía unos meses antes que me conocía muy bien y que era dueño de mí mismo, pero cuando vi cómo se había devastado mi vida . . . me preocupé mucho. . . . Entonces pensé que mi deber original era tratar de reconocer mi mapa interior, empezar a penetrar en mí mismo para que ya no me traicionara yo.²

He sought guidance in esoteric sources such as the *I Ching*³ and the works of Carlos Castaneda. But the most enduring influence on José Agustín's post-Tlatelolco fiction came from Carl Gustav Jung and his theory of self-realization, or what the Swiss psychologist termed the "process of individuation."⁴

All of José Agustín's post-68 fiction deals to some extent with his search for identity. *Se está haciendo tarde*, written during the author's imprisonment in 1971 on trumped-up drug charges, represents the first stage of this sojourn: the requisite descent into hell to confront darkness.⁵ In 1978 Agustín advanced his quest with the publication of *El rey se acerca a su templo*. In this novel, the author achieves a degree of integration by forging a union between the male and the female protagonists, embodiments of the principles of yin and yang. But it is not until *Cerca del fuego* that Agustín truly reconciles his psychic inner struggle. The writer asserts:

Cerca del fuego is the book in which consciously . . . I have plunged into my darkest and most dangerous areas. For me this work is a metaphor for an individuation via literature . . . ("Forty" 27)⁶

A complex novel, *Cerca del fuego* functions on various interpretive levels. However, of primary concern here is how the author arrives at emotional and intellectual syncretism by adhering to Jungian thinking. Numerous literary devices aid the reader in linking the novel's discourse to Jung's prescription for psychological development. The most prominent of these is the novel's structure. The three section titles—"Blanco," "Negro" and "Rojo"—allude to the ancient alchemical equation for transmuting earth to gold.⁷ Alchemists performed three principal steps in their efforts to achieve this impossible metamorphosis. First, in the *nigredo* stage, they would identify earth's impurities. Second, in the *albe-*

do, they would strive to cleanse the earth through purification techniques. And, finally, the unifying qualities of fire would be called upon in the *robleado* stage to produce the miraculous transformations. As other mystics and philosophers before him, most notably the Gnostics, Jung used this alchemical formula as a model of psychic evolution.⁸ The psychologist viewed the process of chemical transmutation as a metaphor for man's personal development. In turn, José Agustín employs Jung's paradigm to signal the process of individuation in *Cerca del fuego*. The fact that Agustín changes the order of the alchemical formula (he begins the novel with step two), provides us with an important key to untangling the text's inverted chronology. In addition, the novel's foremost motif, fire, encourages the reader to interpret the text in light of Jungian symbolism. Because the psychologist viewed fire as emblematic of catharsis, this sign in *Cerca del fuego* reinforces our reading of the text as an individuation process. Another clue that suggests an affinity between Jung and José Agustín is the fact Agustín wrote this novel between the ages of 33-41. These years coincide with the stage of life designated by Jung as the period during which an individual is most likely to undergo psychological transformation (*Essential Jung*, EJ, 227).

Jung defines personality as "definiteness, wholeness and ripeness" (EJ 195). Personality, then, is not an inherent characteristic but rather something one acquires only by making a spiritual quest into the unknown realm of the unconscious. This arduous journey entails passage from a state of confusion through ritual death to rebirth. Lucio, the protagonist of *Cerca del fuego*, clearly passes through these different stages. Agustín's alter ego begins his evolution by mimicking the first step of the alchemical process, the *nigredo*. Centered on confronting the forces of evil, the *nigredo* stage corresponds to Part II of *Cerca del fuego*. In "Negro," Lucio is depicted as a victim of what Jung terms a dissociated personality (EJ 217). Lucio's dissociation stems from his failure to follow the "true path" as dictated by his unconscious (EJ 17). As a result, Lucio falls into a state of crisis characterized by insomnia, nightmares and, subsequently, amnesia. Jung maintains that an outbreak of neurosis such as this is both natural and healthy because it marks "the moment when a new psychological adjustment, that is, a new adaptation, is demanded" (EJ 49). The fissure Lucio suffers between his conscious and unconscious mind can only be mended if some psychic disaster shakes him out of complacency. Hence, Lucio views his amnesia as both a threat, "un laberinto oscurísimo," (13) and a salvation, "una libertad absoluta" (14).

As a result of internal dissociation, Lucio begins his quest in the novel's second section. The majority of text found in "Negro" constitutes Lucio's dreams over the six-year period of his amnesia.⁹ Recurring sym-

bols, such as the labyrinth, the *barranca* and the subterranean lake, bespeak the protagonist's plunge into his unconscious.¹⁰ In addition, the seemingly chaotic and unsystematic nature of discourse in Part II suggests an oneiric state. This emphasis on Lucio's vividly horrific dream life in the first stage of his psychic evolution is a direct reflection of Jungian psychology. Jung holds that dreams allow the individual to "rediscover hidden parts of himself" (*EJ* 21). Consequently, attention to dreams is an essential early ingredient in the recipe for individuation.

In these dreams, Lucio is forced to encounter different embodiments of his psyche, Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious.¹¹ The first archetype Lucio must reckon with is the primitive shadow, which Jung defines as "the 'negative' side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide" (*EJ* 87). In a not-so-veiled parodic tribute to Jung, Agustín has this archetype materialize in Lucio's dreams after a hallucinogenic episode in the town of Yautepec, where the protagonist kills a crazed old psychiatrist with a rusty nail. Through this traumatic vision Lucio not only learns of his potential for evil, but is obliged to confront it in the archetypal form of Arturo, a sinister gangster. Lucio depicts his shadow as the devil incarnate, "una verdadera maldad" (237). As a projection of Lucio's maleficence, Arturo "se hallaba tan sombrío que parecía *negro* y sus ojos eran fuegos vivientes" (237).

Lucio reacts in a fearful, submissive way to Arturo, confessing that "su personalidad me aplastó" (235). However, thanks to the introduction of a second archetype in "Negro," the *ánima*, Lucio gains the strength necessary to overcome his feelings of inadequacy and defeat Arturo. Jung conceived the *ánima*, or female embodiment of man's soul, in light of alchemical principles. These held that the union between male and female components was the "supreme and essential opposition" to be reconciled in each alchemical equation (*EJ* 289). Extrapolating from this premise, Jung prescribes the fusion of the feminine and masculine parts of one's psyche as fundamental to attaining personality. The *ánima* in *Cerca del fuego* manifests itself in various female characters, most notably the "dueña del puesto de mariscos" (an early, ill-defined version in "Negro") and the Reina del Metro (a down-to-earth *ánima* who is featured in "Blanco"). But the woman who best personifies Lucio's inner goodness, creativity and capacity for love is, without doubt, his wife Aurora. On the surface level of the *fabula*, Aurora plays a minimal role in this novel. She is generally found sleeping peacefully at Lucio's side while he, to the contrary, endures the agony of relentless insomnia. Yet Aurora figures prominently in Lucio's dreams. In these she rarely acts or even speaks, but her presence bathes Lucio in "altísimas olas de luz" (243), allowing him to surmount the darkness. It is through Aurora that Lucio learns of the *ánima* within his own psyche. His discovery and ac-

ceptance of this feminine side facilitates his metaphorical rebirth at the end of "Negro":

Un espasmo de excitación. La espina dorsal se estiró por sí misma. Casi sin darme cuenta, mi cuerpo se movía solo y se tendió, y llevé mis piernas estiradas por encima de la cabeza hasta que los pies tocaron el suelo. La barbilla casi se incrustó en el pecho. . . . Un zumbido tenue y prolongado. Deshice la posición y todo se abrigó, el aire entró, refrescante, en mis pulmones. El sol encima de los manglares y las olas. (273-74)

Owing to his spiritual death and rebirth in the second part of the novel, Lucio comes into alignment with divine rather than demonic forces in "Blanco," which chronologically, if not structurally, follows "Negro." In this section, although the protagonist still suffers from amnesia, he experiences an inexplicable inner peace: "me sentía como vuelto a nacer, en paz, en un silencio interior que podía graduar, modular. . . ." (16). Lucio has no recollection of the past six years, the period during which he underwent transformation. This signifies, in Jungian terms, that the protagonist has arrived at a critical juncture in the individuation process: he must return from his voyage into the unconscious. Jung states: "Only the man who can *consciously* assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality" (*EJ* 19; my emphasis). For Lucio, a final task remains: he must find a way to bring his new self back to the conscious realm.

To awaken from his amnesia, Lucio requires the support of three Jungian archetypes: the old wise man, the instinctual child and the earth mother (a primitive manifestation of the *ánima*). Through the aid of each, Lucio recovers pieces of his past until the complete mosaic of his memory is reassembled at the conclusion of Part I. The first guide Lucio encounters is the old sage, Juan José Salazar Saldaña. José Agustín explains that this decrepit, cynical bureaucrat represents a composite of the author's own mentors:

El personaje es una mezcla de facetas de maestros míos, de Juan José Arreola, de José Revueltas, de Rubén Salazar Mallén y de Parménides García Saldaña. Por eso el personaje se llama Juan José Salazar Saldaña.¹²

In *Cerca del fuego*, the old man is the first to encourage Lucio to rediscover his past. But more than this, he obliges the apathetic young man to open his eyes to Mexico's new, tragic reality: the United States has invaded the country and, as a result, Mexican political, social and economic institutions have fallen into disarray. Upon learning that this takeover occurred six years earlier, Lucio realizes that the American occupation

has probably triggered his amnesia. A final lesson the archetypal wise man teaches Lucio is how to use fire to know oneself. Salazar Saldaña demonstrates to Lucio the importance of personal sacrifice by setting himself ablaze. In this dramatic manner he prepares the main character for the trial by fire he will face at the novel's conclusion.

Lucio's second guide in "Blanco" is the child of the slums, Don Pimpirulando. The kinship that exists between Lucio and this child is expressed in several ways. On the one hand, Don Pimpirulando is a boy who, because of economic circumstances, must behave like a grown man, earning his keep and protecting his self-interests. His very name reflects his maturity. On the other hand, Lucio's amnesia renders him as defenseless and innocent as a boy. He is a "niño perdido" (11) adrift in an unfamiliar, hostile world. Lucio's interaction with Don Pimpirulando sparks recollection of his childhood and his own children. Even more, however, the man-child Don Pimpirulando symbolizes a part of Lucio with which he has lost touch: his instincts. Consequently, through Don Pimpirulando's presence Lucio recuperates and embraces the atavistic facet of his being. This milestone in the recovery process paves the road for the protagonist to rediscover the unbridled creative potential of his unconscious in the final section of the novel.

Soon after his adventure with the child, Lucio meets Consuelo, the Reina del Metro. "Una chava de rostro horripilante . . . con cuerpo sublime" (121), the Reina constitutes a curious juxtaposition of attraction and repugnance. In other words, she embodies to perfection the pre-Columbian earth mother and fertility goddess, Coatlicue. By virtue of her primal bond with nature, Consuelo brings Lucio to "el umbral de la conciencia" (205). Their sexual liaison not only facilitates the protagonist's recognition of his basic propensity for love, but also rouses vague memories of his prior marital life with Aurora. These flashbacks finally prompt Lucio to go in search of his wife.

The objective of the *albedo* or white phase of the individuation process is conveyed by Lucio's and Aurora's names, for both denote illumination. Guided by his archetypes, Lucio re-enters "la lucidez total" (16), or the conscious world. The protagonist's renewed clarity of vision enables him to regain his identity and return to home and family filled with a new sense of joy and inner peace:

Con qué brillantez veía la sala y oía la sinfonía 87 de Haydn que Aurora puso. Claro que mi casa era yo mismo; los cuadros, los libros, la música, los muebles, el sillón, todo era expresión de un equilibrio entre quietud y dinamismo, un lenguaje sin palabras. (205)

But along with recovering his homelife, Lucio also remembers the crea-

tive side of his spirit. He is a writer whose struggle to complete a novel became so crippling that it exacerbated his amnesia. "Blanco" concludes by demonstrating that Lucio's homecoming, his return to wholeness and consciousness, has cured him of his writer's block:

Me dejaba llevar, veía el mundo con ojos nuevos, . . . veía que la vida se abría, como las palabras nuevas de un texto que se escribe, que se escribe, que nadie planeó, que fluye como el agua y rebasa todo obstáculo. (209)

The act of writing this narrative, as well as portions of the text itself, are recorded in "Rojo," the final third of *Cerca del fuego*. Not surprisingly, the predominant motif of Part III is fire, but the element here is presented not as the destructive fire of hell but rather as the purifying flames of heaven. In both alchemical and psychological terms, fire is associated positively with psychic renewal and creativity. According to alchemical theory, fire acted upon gold through a process known as the mysterious conjunction to produce a spiritual compound: the "red spirit." It was this compound alone that could effect the total fusion of opposing forces so highly coveted by alchemists (*EJ* 289). Psychologically, the "red spirit" connotes the unfettered creative drive. For this reason, practitioners of spiritual art have long viewed alchemical fire as a symbol of the artist's desire to articulate the ineffable, to tap new modes of expression that surpass the referential. Art critic Donald Kuspit elucidates this connection between the creative process and alchemy:

By converting material, even the most random and outrageous material, into the "mystical inner construction" of art, the artist gives the material inner meaning and thus uses it to generate spiritual atmosphere . . . The alchemical approach emphasizes art's transformative power. (315)

The presence of the "red spirit" signifies that not only has an individual been restored to psychic health, but the creative potential of that individual has been released. Jung explains:

the birth of personality in oneself has a therapeutic effect. It is as if a river that had run to waste in sluggish side-streams and marshes suddenly found its way back to its proper bed. (*EJ* 208)

In "Rojo," Lucio is ready to become an "in-dividual," one who can no longer be divided (*EJ* 376). He writes:

Todo está en su sitio dentro de ti, . . . el acomodamiento es total, siempre ha

sido así, siempre es así, cómo pudiste olvidar . . . el orden que siempre está allí . . . (292)

At this final stage, Lucio undergoes purification by jumping into a metaphorical fire, melting away and rematerializing. Enervated, he pens the closing words of the novel:

Te sientas a la máquina, golpeas las teclas, ellas responden, como siempre, tienes que terminar, sacar lo que ya se había venido formando sin que lo advirtieras, hiciste que se volviera posible la realidad cortante que al cristalizarse es tan conocida, aquí la tienes, ante ti, nítida en la formación exacta de las palabras que la componen y la animan, le dan vida, la incendian, la hacen arder perennemente, la imprimen en esta página y te hacen ver que, ahora sí, ya terminaste de escribir el libro. (312)

The individuation Lucio achieves in *Cerca del fuego* is born of knowing himself. Psychic unity, however, is not a phenomenon available only to the individual. Like Jung, José Agustín believes that the self-knowledge that promotes transformation can take place on a societal level. Furthermore, he feels that the time is ripe for Mexicans to abandon complacency and self-imposed amnesia so that the country may once again return to its "true path." His optimism on this score is palpable:

Lo que hace falta en México es que cada quien defienda sus intereses, y no que, en vías de una supuesta revolución mexicana, haya un punto aparente de concordia en el que nadie esgrime lo que verdaderamente piensa sino que sigue ocultando sus intereses en aras de una supuesta unidad. Eso es una falacia. En el momento en que se asuma la realidad y se acabe esa ficción, el país va a avanzar muchísimo, y se va a quitar un gran peso de encima. Va a ser un descanso como en España cuando se fue Franco, una renovación tremenda. (Schaffer, "Entrevista" 342)

José Agustín hopes his novel will serve as a vehicle through which the reader may set into motion the process of individuation. He invites the reader to re-construct the text for herself and, in so doing, undergo the same cathartic experience as Lucio. In one of Jung's last works, *The Undiscovered Self* (1957), the psychologist declares: "the salvation of the world consists in the salvation of the individual soul" (111). This idea, translated into a Mexican context, underlies José Agustín's promise of individuation in *Cerca del fuego*.

Susan C. Schaffer
University of California, Los Angeles

NOTES

1. Héctor Manjarrez, for example, attributes a nine-year hiatus in his literary production to the trauma he suffered as a result of the 68 violence. In an interview with Federico Campbell he reported how severe writer's block prevented him from working on his novel *Lapsus*: "Empecé a escribir [*Lapsus*] en 1968, pero de mayo a octubre del 68 habían sucedido tantas cosas, que simplemente me era imposible seguir haciéndola; sólo podía darme de golpes en la pared ya que no podía matar a nadie. . . ." (v). See also Schaffer, "Narrativa."
2. From an unpublished portion of an interview I conducted with José Agustín in Cuautla, Mexico on June 14, 1987. For published excerpts, see Schaffer, "Entrevista."
3. Numerology from the *I Ching* and other mystical works figures prominently in *Cerca del fuego*, especially with regard to its structure. The novel comprises 64 sections, reflecting the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching*. In addition, each of the work's three major sections is divided into 12 subdivisions, a number which refers to the 12 branches of the cabalistic tree of life.
4. See, in particular, Jung, *Integration*.
5. For a discussion of the influence of drugs on José Agustín's fiction, see Schaffer, "Drug Experience."
6. Agustín also alludes to this in his interview with Reinhard Teichman: "Mi novela, de una forma u otra, lo que propone es como un gran sacrificio y una purificación; está trabajada a través del símbolo del fuego: hay que meterse en el fuego para poder salir de todo esto" (59).
7. Agustín admits to using "procesos alquímicos" as model of psychic evolution in Schaffer, "Entrevista" (340).
8. See especially *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Mysterium Coniunctiones*. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye also demonstrates the link between the alchemical formula and psychic development in classical literature: "there is a close association between the purifying of the human soul and the transmuting of earth to gold, not only literal gold but the fiery quintessential gold of which the heavenly bodies are made" (146).
9. Once more, numerology plays a role in determining meaning. A political reading of *Cerca del fuego* would certainly view the six years of amnesia as a pointed reference to the Mexican presidential *sexenio*.
10. I explore the many parallels that exist between José Agustín and Malcolm Lowry in a forthcoming article, "Erupción de coincidencias."
11. See Jung, *Archetypes*.
12. This is another excerpt from the unpublished portion of my interview with José Agustín on June 14, 1987.

WORKS CITED

- Campbell, Federico. "Que todos volvamos a ser humanos." "La cultura en México," *Siempre* (June 3, 1970): v.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U Press, 1957.
- Guerra-Cunningham, Lucía. "Luz y oscuridad: El dilema de la juventud mexicana en *El rey se acerca a su templo* de José Agustín." *Nueva Revista del Pacífico* 10-11 (1978): 56-60.
- José Agustín. *Cerca del fuego*. Mexico: Plaza y Janés, 1986.

- _____. *El rey se acerca a su templo*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1978.
- _____. "Forty Archetypes Draw Their Swords." *José Agustín: Onda and Beyond*. Eds. June C. D. Carter and Donald L. Schmidt. Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri Press, 1986. 24-36.
- _____. *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1973.
- _____. *Tragicomedia mexicana 1: La vida en México de 1940 a 1970*. Mexico: Planeta, 1990.
- Jung, Carl G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Vol. 9; *Psychology and Alchemy*, Vol. 12; and *Mysterium Coniunctiones*, vol 14. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U Press, 1967.
- _____. *The Essential Jung*. Ed. Anthony Storr. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U Press, 1983.
- _____. *The Integration of the Personality*. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1939.
- _____. *The Undiscovered Self*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1957.
- Kuspit, Donald. "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art." *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Ed. Maurice Tuchman. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986. 313-25.
- Rojas, Mario A. "The Reconciliation of Opposites in *El rey se acerca a su templo* by José Agustín." *José Agustín: Onda and Beyond*. Eds. June C. D. Carter and Donald L. Schmidt. Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri Press, 1986. 78-90.
- Schaffer, Susan C. "The Drug Experience in José Agustín's Fiction." *Mosaic* (Fall 1986): 133-44.
- _____. "Entrevista con José Agustín." *Hispania* 72 (May 1989): 340-42.
- _____. "Erupción de coincidencias: José Agustín y Malcolm Lowry frente al volcán." *Más allá de la Onda: La narrativa de José Agustín*. Eds. June C. D. Carter and Donald L. Schmidt. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz (forthcoming).
- _____. "La narrativa actual en México: El caso de Héctor Manjarrez." *Tinta* (Spring 1985): 77-79.
- Teichman, Reinhard. *De la Onda en adelante: Conversaciones con 21 novelistas mexicanos*. Mexico: Posada, 1987.