

Shamanic Dreams and Experiences in Jorge Luis Borges and José María Arguedas

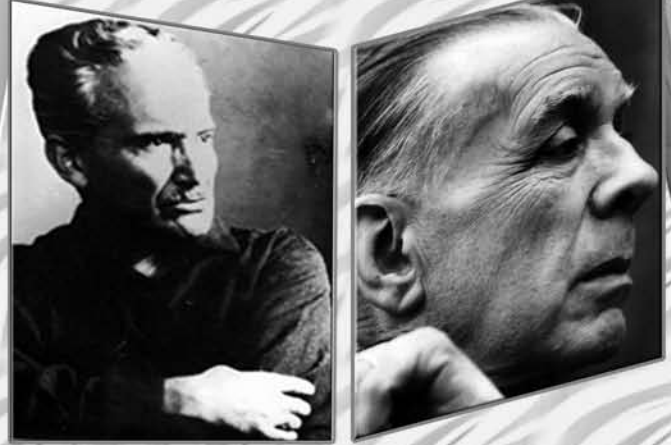
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At first glance the creative universes of Jorge Luis Borges and José María Arguedas couldn't be farther apart. These two giants of Latin American literature have typically represented opposite ends of a very rich continuum of dreams, experiences and perspectives. Borges is often seen as the universalist through whose work many literary traditions can be read, almost as if—as some critics have said—he wouldn't belong to any particular country or region of the world. Arguedas, instead is seen not only as Peruvian, but, particularly, as a voice for the Indians, a writer trying to make known a rich tradition that was mainly oral, and which had been till then misunderstood by those writing from outside that culture.

Arguedas and Borges, though, have in common their interest in the poetic capturing of a reality they know is too vast to be rendered in language. They also share a fascination with the porous limits between the visible and the invisible and with forms of perceiving that are independent of hegemonic perspectives. Let's see first how being born on the same continent, they came to be so different; how the circumstances of their childhood and adolescence totally diverged; and how their paths began to converge at a deeper level, beyond nationalities and historical circumstances, into a common interest in the inner realities and the transcendence and immanence of the Spirit.

Jorge Luis Borges was born in 1899 in Buenos Aires, into an Argentine family whose roots went back to the founders of the nation, and grew up in a house where the swords and portraits of relatives that fought in the wars of independence still hung on the walls. Borges' paternal grandfather married an English woman who was visiting Argentina, and it was in the lap of his British grandmother that Georgie—who communicated with her in English and with the rest of the household in Spanish—learned to read first in English rather than Spanish. He spent the better part of his childhood reading the books of his father's large library as he recalls in one of his prologues:

For years I believed I had grown up in one of the suburbs of Buenos Aires, a suburb of adventurous streets and visible sunsets. The truth is that I grew up in a



garden, behind a speared railing, and in a library of unlimited English books. In every corner of Palermo (I have been told) knives and guitars were teeming, but those who filled my mornings and gave a horrid pleasure to my nights were Stevenson's blind buccaneer, dying under the horses hoofs, and the traitor who abandoned his friend on the moon, and the time traveler who brought from the future a faded flower. (Evaristo Carriego, 1955)

At the other end of the spectrum, José María Arguedas was born in 1911 in Andahuaylas, a province of Peru where the majority of the population spoke Quechua. His father was a lawyer from Cuzco and his mother an Andahuylina. She died when José María was only three years old. A few years later Arguedas' father married a rich widow who already had three grown children and relegated the child to the kitchen with the servants during the long periods when his father was away. Arguedas recalls that he was practically raised by the Indians that served at his stepmother's place, and when he was nine he escaped her hacienda and the brutal treatment he received from his older stepbrother and was given refuge by Indians of Andean communities. Since he spoke more Quechua than Spanish during his formative years, all of his poetry is written in Quechua. His novels and short stories were written in a Spanish in which he has interwoven expressions in Quechua in an effort to convey some of the feeling of the language and of the culture that he knew so intimately and that had been ignored or looked down upon by the rest of Peru.

Not only their childhood but also their adolescence, kept shaping Borges and Arguedas for worlds far apart. When Georgie was 14, the family went to Europe to accompany his father who was to be treated by a Genevan eye specialist since he was going blind. He was the fifth generation of males who went blind and Georgie would inherit that destiny too. While they were in Europe, the First World War broke out and the Borges family was trapped in Switzerland, where Georgie attended for four years le College Calvin, taking all of the subjects in French, a language he had to learn from scratch. At the same time he taught himself German by translating Heine's poetry with the help of a dictionary.

As Georgie was getting more and more immersed in the world of books and of Western culture, his contemporary, José María, was experiencing a deep immersion in the real world of Peru. The young fugitive received protection and love from Indians who, though poor, recognized he was even more destitute than they were and shared with

him the little they had. When he was 12, his father, who was being persecuted for political reasons and had had to escape far away, came back to meet with him and they traveled on horse through different regions of Peru. José María studied when he could in schools of different towns and finally got a secondary school degree by studying on his own and passing all the exams for that degree. In 1931, the same year his father died, he entered the University of San Marcos in Lima to obtain a diploma in Anthropology.

That two writers from such different backgrounds came to share similar ideas is a story that is very telling for us today. It speaks of the transformative power inherent in catastrophic events.

The First World War and its unparalleled range of destruction shocked the European intellectuals, who had till then convinced themselves that the world was on a steady path of progress. Confronted with a reality they couldn't explain with their previous paradigms, many artists and intellectuals turned their attention to more distant and ancient cultures, and to new dimensions of the unconscious. Among them were the Expressionists. Borges liked Expressionism because "it reflects a whole series of deep preoccupations: magic, dreams, Eastern religions and philosophies, the aspiration towards a world brotherhood."¹ In the years immediately after the First World War, Borges, as many of his contemporaries, became interested in Buddhism, in Walt Whitman, in pacifism and the brotherhood of all men. His interests were kindled by his father who was a Spencerian anarchist, and did not believe in states, passports, armies, churches, nor any kind of hierarchical authority and who helped develop in his son an attitude of continuous questioning of the establishment and of prevalent discourses.

Arguedas, on the other hand, experienced directly the communal perspective of the *ayllus*—the Indian kin collectives received him, in spite of being half white—their held beliefs and practices of communion with the rest of nature, and with the Spirit present in the deep rivers, mountains, etc. He grew up with the basic beliefs of any Indian child and they persisted throughout his life. "Even now," he said in 1969, "I must confess that, I can't believe that a river wouldn't be a man as alive as me."² From living with them, Arguedas not only became familiar with the connection between the visible and the invisible, but also developed great love and respect for their culture. As anthropologist he postulated a cultural theory of a heterogeneous nationality in which the dominant *criollo* society would acknowledge the rights

of the indigenous world, not only as a legitimate culture but as an intrinsic part of the national diversity. For a good part of his life Arguedas thought that some kind of resolution could be achieved if the powerful could come to appreciate the Indians. He also fought to make clear to both ethnic groups that no acceptable Christian God would approve the suffering of the Indians.

These themes are present in one of his most beautiful short stories “La agonía de Rasu-Niti” (Death Throes of Rasu-Niti, 1962)³ where the dying shaman dances his last dance in the presence of his immediate community. Laying himself down to be a bridge for the Spirit of the Mountain to pass through him to the new generation, through his successor, the young Atok’sayku, the shaman preserves not only the ancient rituals but faith in the cyclical dimension of life and the immortality of the Spirit. That the Spirit, who had so often inhabited Rasu-Niti—the main ritual dancer, *dansak* or shaman—the will not die is shown in the story to be not only important to assuage the loss of the father and husband in the *dansak*’s family, but especially to re-affirm the continuation of the culture and of the Indian race.

The notion of the transcendence of the Spirit beyond time and space and the hope of rebirth even after the greatest cataclysm is part of the ancient Andean beliefs prior to the arrival of the Europeans and—together with their cult of the Pachamama, Mother Earth, and the spirits of Nature—has persisted in the Andes till today, in spite of three centuries of Spanish colonization and their cruel campaigns of extirpation of idolatries. For the Indians the Spirit is present on the tops of the mountains, in deep rivers, in the wind and listens and speaks to

them from there. For the Quechua, time is not linear, as for the Western mind, but instead develops cyclically, with a phase of ascendance and another of decline that culminates in a great *Pachacutec* (Universal Crisis) in which the world can disintegrate. Confronted with the challenges and perils of the harsh natural environment in which they live, they did not become pessimistic and resigned. Instead they conceived the role of human beings is to re-establish cosmic balance. From there come the concepts of *Tinkuy* and *Paikiki*. *Tinkuy* is tension/fight but also reunion. *Paikiki* is the magic pair of qualities that compensates and levels/equalizes.

That tension and reunion of life and death is central to “La agonía de Rasu-Niti.”⁴ When the dying dancer feels his last hour approaching, he sends for his friends the musicians, and with his last strength gets dressed in his ritual clothes and, imbued by Wamani, the Spirit of the Mountain, he dances for the last time for his community. The Spirit makes itself present in the form of a white condor, burning with fire and light, which nests at the heart of the dancer.

In a rich weaving of different perspectives, Arguedas shows the Spirit as visible to those who most often invoked him, like the harpist and the violinist who always participated in the shamanic rites with the dancer, and also those most innocent, like the young daughter of Rasu-Niti, who at the end clearly senses his presence.⁵ Not so the older daughter who has lost part of her soul when raped by the *patron* (landowner); to this he poetically alludes in the story as Wamani hearing the sound of the hoof of the boss’s horse, and seeing how she has been sullied by him... Through the dying man the prophecy



comes that Wamani, the white condor, will grow, and swallow the eyes of the horse (symbol of the European power and brutal repression of the Indians).“Without the horse,” predicts the voice, “the boss is nothing, just cow shit.” We see this faith, in spite of all odds, today in the Andes when the elders come together to pray for the future they want for their children and grandchildren.

The story of the death throes is really a story of resurrection. Arguedas poetically presents the idea of crisis and renewal, for the dying one, whose spirit will continue in his apprentice now also imbued by Wamani, for the older daughter who had been harmed and may heal, and especially for the Indian race, which has had to suffer many years of foreign domination.

“Wamani no muere,” says the younger daughter, experiencing directly that the Spirit doesn’t die. It survives in nature and is expressed through people. Arguedas speaks of it when we writes:

...the genius of the dansak depends on who inhabits him: is it the spirit of a mountain (Wamani); of a precipice whose silence is transparent; of a cave from which escape golden bulls and “ghosts” on fire? Or the cascade of a river that falls from the highest points in the mountain range; or perhaps just a bird or a flying insect that has experienced the abyss, the trees and ants, and knows the secrets of the night.

This perception of the Spirit present in nature as a kind of embodied consciousness all around us, reflects a deep unitive quality of the universe that makes me think of the deep weave of matter and spirit present in the writings of the French paleontologist and mystic philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, who began to open my mind to other dimensions in my early teens.

What is marvelous in the Andean culture as well as in other pre-modern societies and many peasant communities in Polynesia, Africa, China, and India—as I experienced when living with them—is that this immanence of the Spirit is not an intellectual framework but a daily experience of communion with nature. Arguedas puts it in words in his Quechua poem “A Call to Certain Academics”:

*They say that we do not know anything
That we are backwardness
That our head needs changing
for a better one.*

*They say that some learned men are saying this
about us*

*These academics who reproduce themselves
In our lives.*

*What is there in the banks of these rivers, Doctor?
Take out your binoculars
And your spectacles
Look if you can.
Five hundred flowers
From five hundred different types of potato
Grow on the terraces
Above abysses
That your eyes don’t reach
Those five hundred flowers
Are my brain/My flesh.⁶*

In a very poetic use of Quechua, Arguedas chose for the *dansak* the name Rasu-Niti, which means “he who crashes the snow.” The shaman is the son of a big mountain with perennial snows, which has sent its Spirit in the form of a grey condor with a white back to inhabit him for the last time. The young “Atok’sayku,” faintly sees the Spirit condor as he arrives, and he sees it much more clearly flapping its big wings above the head of the shaman when the dance begins. Arguedas conveys with these words the entering of the Spirit into the body of the dying man. “He danced with great energy. The shadow of the room began to swell as if filled with wind. The ritual dancer was being born again...but his face was rigid, hard.” As the different tunes of the dance progress, and the dancer feels more and more filled with the Spirit although he is losing control of his legs and arms, he looks at his oldest daughter and, in a trance, says, “The God is growing. It will kill the horse.” Not only the dance, but the music itself in the story appears as if played by the Wamani through the musicians hands and then, at the culmination of the story at the very same moment that the shaman dies, the Spirit enters in his young timid disciple, who suddenly jumps up by the side of the cadaver and dances as if flying. His voice says, “Wamani is here! In my head! In my chest, flapping!”

The death throes of Rasu-Niti involve his entire life being open to the life of the Spirit and in service of his community. There is a strong element of ecstasy and trance in his dying and his rebirth in his disciple, as well as re-affirmation of their beliefs and their hopes in a cyclical sense of history.

That Arguedas would try to somehow recapture in his poetic narrative the shamanic quality of some of his experiences with the Indians in the Andes in Peru, is understandable but how did Borges come to include

shamanic dreams in some of his short stories? What brought Borges so close to the perspectives and imaginario of pre-modern societies?

This is an aspect of Borges that has not been much discussed till now. I owe to my friendship with him, our long conversations and my visits to his home, the answer to this mystery. In his stoical room, by the small desk on which I would sometimes put a poem he had dictated to me, there was a collection of Icelandic sagas that Borges' father had given to him in his early youth. That primitive mythology and the laconic style of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) who had compiled the Icelandic sagas of the 13th century stayed with Borges all his life and eventually inspired him to write about medieval Scandinavian literature in 1966 and to translate almost 20 years later one of those sagas with the help of a dictionary and of María Kodama, his student, travel companion, and, for the last months of his life, wife.

In a conversation with Borges about his rendition into Spanish of "Gylfi's Hallucination," I mentioned to him that I was struck by the fact that the image of a tree with roots in the heavens, which appears in that medieval Icelandic saga, appeared 15 centuries before in the *Bhagavad Gita* in India and was also part of the Mayan cosmology in pre-Columbian America. He replied that the human spirit is not so different, and that when it imagines with sincerity, it imagines the same things.

Borges' attraction to ancient cosmogonies also came from his early interest in Expressionism and through it in Eastern religions and philosophies, magic, and the world of dreams. He was fascinated by the richness of perspective that resulted from considering views different from the canonical ones. For example, stepping aside from the categories of fixed space and time, which are the cornerstones of the Western view of the world, Borges conceived, like ancient cultures, the possibility of a circular time, and of multiple dimensions of perception and manifestation of our world, anticipating and illustrating in his very intuitive rendering of reality, what is today revealed

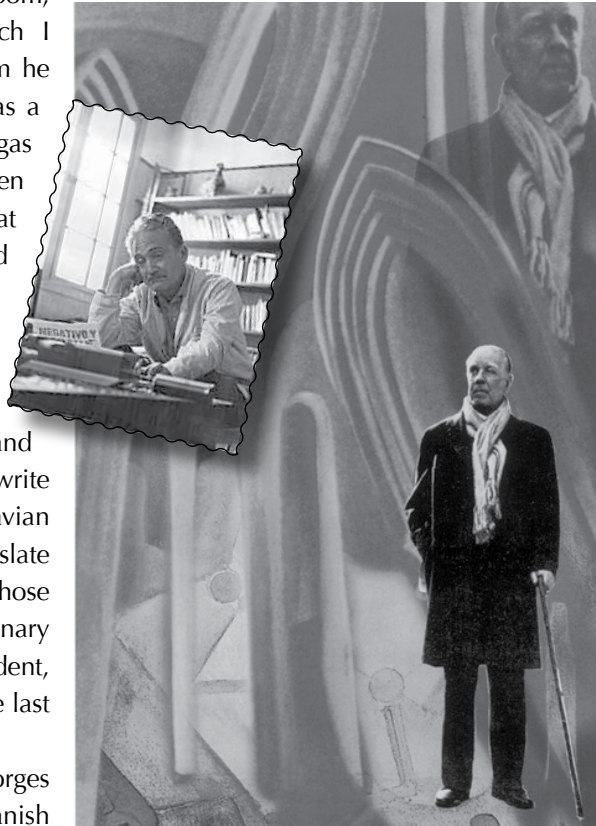
to us also by quantum physics, fractals, and complexity theory. His interest in metaphysical perplexities and Eastern philosophies surfaces in his work in concepts about the creation of our inner universe, the unity of all beings, the ending of the wheel of suffering by surrendering the ego to a more encompassing experience of being, a space-time tapestry in which all the threads and generating lines of the universe are knit together, etc. Some of these ideas are central in his stories "La escritura del Dios" ("The God's Script") and "El etnógrafo" on which I would like to comment from this perspective now.

"The God's Script" was included in *The Aleph* (1949), which belongs, together with *Ficciones* (1944), to the period of Borges better known—and some would say best—stories. "The Ethnographer" was included in *Elogio de la sombra* (In Praise of Darkness) (1969) which mainly is a book of poems that Borges published when he was seventy. In the prologue to *Elogio* he suggests that the few instances of prose included in the book should be read as poetry, that is,

with a sense of mystery and beauty.

The main character of the "The God's Script" is a Mayan priest who has been tortured and imprisoned by Pedro de Alvarado, the Spanish conqueror who terrorized Central America especially Mexico and Guatemala 1520-1540. While confined in his cell, the priest conceives the idea of deciphering the magical sentence that one of the gods, "foreseeing that at the end of time there would be devastation and ruin, wrote on the first day of Creation, with a power to ward off those evils." He recalls that the tradition said that the god "wrote it in such a way that it would reach the most distant generations and not be subject to chance. No one knows where it was written nor with what characters, but it is certain that it exists, secretly, and that a chosen one shall read it." Looking for the god's script the priest enters into a kind of vertigo:

*Throughout the earth there are ancient forms,
forms incorruptible and eternal, any one of
them could be the symbol I sought. A mountain*



could be the speech of the god, or a river, ... or the configuration of the stars ... The anxiety was consuming me when I remembered the jaguar was one of the attributes of the god.

We hear echoes of Rasu-Niti's story in "The God's Script" in that the Spirit is present all around us in the earth and the sky. And in this story too, there is a power animal that represents the attributes of the Mayan god as the condor did for the Quechuan one.

In a kind of Teilhardian show of interconnectedness, the priest says:

I imagined the first morning of time: I imagined my god confiding his message to the living skin of the jaguars, who would love and reproduce without end, in caverns, in cane fields, on islands, in order that the last men might receive it. I imagined that net of tigers, that teeming labyrinth of tigers, inflicting horror upon pastures and flocks in order to perpetuate a design. In the next cell there was a jaguar, in his vicinity I perceived a confirmation to my conjecture and a secret favor.

Another line that seems as though it escaped from Teilhard—or from Fritjof Capra's *The Web of Life*—is "What type of sentence (I asked myself) will an absolute mind construct? I considered that even in the human languages there is no proposition that does not imply the entire universe; to say the tiger is to say the tigers that begot it, the deer and turtles devoured by it, the grass on which the deer fed, the earth that was mother to the grass, the heaven that gave birth to the earth. I considered that in the language of a god every word would enunciate that infinite concatenation of facts, and not in an implicit but explicit manner, and not progressively but instantaneously."

Once he conceives the scripture is in the jaguar skin, the priest is moved to decipher it by his desire to regain physical freedom and power to revenge. He spends years trying to decode a possible meaning from the writing on the jaguar which he sees only once a day when light breaks into the vault as the trap of the high ceiling opens for the jailer to lower water and food to them. He tries to learn the order and configuration of the spots and fix in his mind the black forms running through the yellow skin—a bit like what Borges had to do in confiding to his memory the books he loved the most, knowing that blindness was his inexorable destiny. Exhausted by the hardships of his toil, and the seeming impossibility of his task, the priest has dreams within dreams until he finally is able to awake, to come back to the now, and to be fully present to his circumstances by accepting them. At that

moment the deep transformation occurs, he leaves behind his individual concerns and is able to experience the unity of everything, like a shaman would. Borges refers to that transformation with these lines.

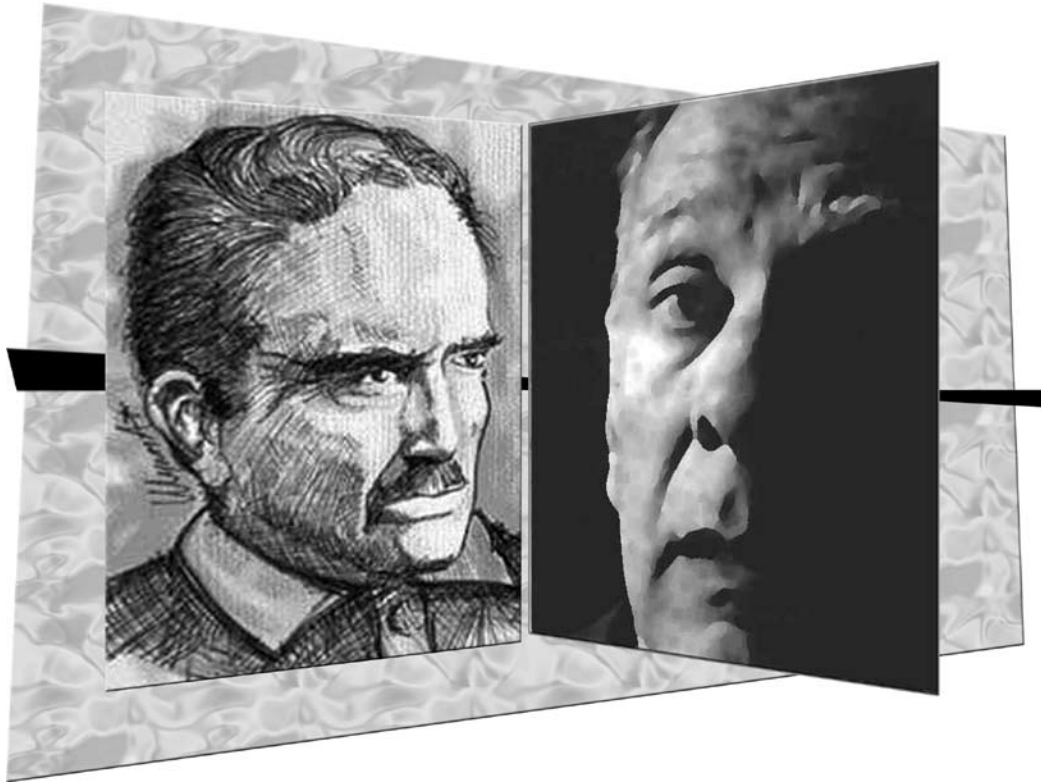
A man becomes confused, gradually, with the form of his destiny; a man is, by and large, his circumstances. More than a decipherer or an avenger, more than a priest of the god, I was one imprisoned. From the tireless labyrinth of dreams I returned as if to my home to the harsh prison. I blessed its dampness, I blessed its tiger, I blessed the crevice of light, I blessed my old suffering body, I blessed the darkness and the stone. Then there occurred what I cannot forget nor communicate. There occurred the union with the divinity, with the universe.

I saw an exceedingly high Wheel, which... was infinite. Interlinked, all things that are, were and shall be, formed it, and I was one of the fibers of that total fabric and Pedro de Alvarado who tortured me was another. There lay revealed the causes and the effects and it sufficed me to see that Wheel in order to understand it all, without end.

O bliss of understanding, greater than the bliss of imagining or feeling. I saw the universe and I saw the intimate designs of the universe. I saw the origins narrated in the Book of the Common [Borges' reference to the Popol Vuh, the book of creation of the Mayas]. I saw the first men of wood, the cisterns that turned against the men, the dogs that ravaged their faces. I saw the faceless god concealed behind the other gods. I saw infinite processes that formed one singled felicity and, understanding all, I was able to understand the script of the tiger.

These lines remind me of what Teilhard wrote in *The Human Phenomenon*: "Seeing. One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing—if not ultimately at least essentially. To be more is to be more united."⁷ Borges and Teilhard must have written them around the same years, although they did not know of the existence of each other: Borges, writing in Buenos Aires decades before he was internationally acclaimed. Teilhard, in China, France or the USA, traveling and writing but without ever receiving authorization from the Vatican to publish his books during his lifetime.

In a very Buddhist conclusion, Borges proposes in "The God's Script" that it is only when the character stops being pulled in several directions by his past and his future, by his thirst of power and revenge, that he can experience



freedom from the physical prison and the mental one. Borges presents individual life and its concerns as a dream and suggests that an awakening to deeper meaning is possible by coming out of the labyrinth of dreams. It is only when the character surrenders his individual ego and blesses his circumstances that he is able to cut at the root of his suffering, and by regaining his center, find peace. From that undivided state of attention he is, then, capable of deciphering the god's script.

More interested in the process than the product, Borges presents the achievement as a bonus, and not as the main gain. The specific understanding the character had strived for could only come from understanding first the totality, the union of causes and effects and all of the threads that, interlinked, bring us to the present circumstances. In this story Borges seems, with the expression "O bliss of understanding, greater than the bliss of imagining or feeling," to be referring to understanding not mainly as an intellectual deciphering but as an opening to presence and to grace by being in the here and now.

Of course, Borges being Borges, there are many readings to this story and the marvel is that they can all be done at the same time.... for example, although Qaholom is a creator god, he is not the main creator god of the Mayan pantheon....but, then, Borges always liked marginal figures too....It is left to the reader to ponder some possible questions. Did the priest find enlightenment? Or just peace? Was he able to decode the word or is he deluding

himself? Could he have managed to change the whole world had he put the words to a test? Does it matter? From what perspective would it matter? Would it matter from the perspective of power and linear history? Is it more important perhaps to be able to experience the spirit when living in poverty, in prison, or challenged by catastrophe?

A similar idea but with a different twist appears in "The Ethnographer." The main character in this story is a university student, who being "naturally respectful, did not distrust books nor those who write books" (here Borges' fine irony and his management of the understatement give us a hint of his reflections about academic studies as well as a clue of what will happen afterwards in the story). The narrator tells us that the student

was at that age when a man doesn't yet know who he is and is ready to commit to what is presented to him: Persian mysticism or the unknown origins of the Hungarian language, the adventure of war or of algebra, Puritanism or orgies (as always, this Borges' catalog is very telling). At the university he was advised to study indigenous languages. There are esoteric rites that persist in some tribes in the West; his professor, an aged man, proposed to him to settle on a reservation, to observe the initiation rites and to discover the secret that the shamans reveal to the initiated. At his return he would write a thesis that the authorities of the institute would give to print. Murdoch accepted with alacrity.

Before going any further into this story that in one of its possible readings contrasts bureaucratic academic learning with deeper and more memorable learning, it may help us to enjoy the story even more if we knew that, like Arguedas, Borges distrusted academic pundits, official history, and rigid frameworks of interpretation. For example, while teaching at the University in Buenos Aires, Borges would dedicate one class to teach Stevenson or Shakespeare as a great writer, and another to demolish him, and then would ask students to come to their own conclusions based on their own analysis of lines they have enjoyed or disliked, and to speak about them. In his essay "La supersticiosa ética del lector" ("The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader")⁸ Borges makes fun of blind respect shown for well known names, and of not following one's inner guidance to question, no matter who or what, if a statement doesn't ring true. Of some readers, he comments with irony, "They subordinate emotion to ethics, or better to unchallenged etiquette." And in "El pudor de la historia" ("The Modesty of History")⁹ he points out that in the universal recounting of history, there are glaring omissions of truly transcendental moments.⁹ "Eyes see what they are accustomed to see. Tacitus did not perceive the Crucifixion, although it is registered in his book." Referring to the importance given to a battle in 1792, Borges writes, with great perspicacity, in the fifties:

Since that day there has been an abundance of historic occasions and one of the tasks of governments...has been to fabricate them or simulate them, with lots of prior propaganda and persistent publicity. Such occasions in which the influence of Cecil B. de Mille can be noted, have less to do with history than with journalism: I have suspected that history, real history, and its essential dates can therefore remain secret for a long time.

He points out that of greater consequences than the battle is Aeschylus's introduction of a second actor into Greek drama, which brought the richness of a different perspective and the possibility of dialogue.

When Borges writes that Murdoch, the university student, accepted "with alacrity" the project presented to him by the old professor, he sets the stage for the confrontation between superstitious learning and a real passion for learning. Borges' questioning of the establishment, any establishment, is clear here in the details of the story. The old professor appears to be more interested in linguistics or in the esoteric rites (perhaps even as linguistic formulas) than in the experience of the natives themselves and the context that makes it possible.

The student is sent to study them in their exoticism and encouraged to secure the support of the institutional authorities by publishing about that exotic subject under the wings of his mentor, etc.

Interestingly, Borges feigns not to know certain details, for example, the narrator does not seem sure of what the name of the protagonist is. In a way it doesn't matter. He stands for many of us, in our many different circumstances when confronted with "authorities" and the establishment. As Borges puts it, the story was referred to him and "is about just one protagonist, except that in any story the protagonists are thousands, visible and invisible, alive and dead." Like the tigers in the previous story, we are the sum of our ancestors, teachers, friends, books, and films we love, politics, etc... Very succinctly Borges writes, "One of his ancestors had died in the frontier wars, that old discord of his lineage was now a link." Then he refers to the arduous process the student followed to be accepted as one of the tribe so they would confide the secret to him.

More than two years he inhabited the prairie, among adobe walls or under the sky. He rose before dawn and retired at dusk, he even came to dream in a language that was not that of his parents. During the first months of learning, he took furtive notes that he would tear up later, perhaps not to awaken the suspicion of others, perhaps because he no longer needed them. (Part of the joy of reading Borges is realizing at the end of the story how he has bifurcated it under our very eyes and in passing with a comment like this).

The narrator continues:

At the end of a period determined by certain moral and physical practices, the priest ordered him to begin to remember his dreams and tell them to him in the early dawn...He realized that in full moon nights, he dreamed of bison. He confided these recurrent dreams to his teacher, who at last revealed to him the secret doctrine. One morning, without saying goodbye to anyone, Murdoch left.

From this abrupt leaving, the reader may expect that Murdoch would follow that destiny in academia promised to him before his arrival at the reservation. To complicate matters more the narrator tells us that "in the city he felt the nostalgia of those first evenings on the prairie when, long ago, he had felt nostalgia of the city." This tells us in a Borgesian way that the protagonist doesn't particularly identify with the city any more. A series of short sentences and a very crisp dialogue take us quickly to the end. "He walked to his professor's office and told him that he knew

the secret and had resolved not to reveal it." His decision takes the professor aback "Does your oath bind you?" he asks, "Is the English language insufficient to communicate it?" One can feel the tension in the questions, almost as if the professor was asking to whom is the student going to be loyal, or whether there is a physical impossibility to continue with what was planned. The character's answer tells us much about Borges and his attitude towards established perspectives. "No, now that I possess the secret I could enunciate it in a hundred different (and even contradictory) ways. I do not know how to tell you that the secret is precious and that now science, our science, seems to me a mere frivolity." The sentences that follow: "The secret, on the other hand, is not as worthy as the ways that took me to it. Those paths need to be experienced," reaffirm aboriginal epistemology and pre-modern societies' ways of knowing based on experience, instead of mere intellectual speculation and "unchallenged etiquette."

Not interested in the process his student underwent, nor in the questions of how do we know, and what is the relevance of what we learn, "the professor said with coldness... I will inform the Committee of your decision. Are you planning to live with the Indians?" Murdoch's reply points to another concern of Borges about the limited validity of theories and the fragmentation of knowledge in academia. "No, I probably will not go back to the prairie. What its men taught me is valid for any place and any circumstance."

Then, as often in Borges, an amazing last line deconstructs, or seems to deconstruct, what was just created and reminds the reader that any reading is a kind of dialogue that happens only with her/his collaboration and any text is just artifice. It is made of words put together by the mind of the writer—or the muse through her/him: "Fred married, divorced and is now one of the librarians at Yale." What do you make of it? At the level of content there are many possible readings. Borges worked and reworked every line until it would create the exact evocative aesthetic impression that would open many different, and often contradictory, worlds of meaning in his readers to keep the pleasure of that dialogue many hours after it had finished.

Beyond various readings and biographical references—Borges married for the first time on the first day of Spring in 1967 and divorced 3 years later; he was in the throes of that marriage when he wrote "The Ethnographer"—there is in this story as in other texts by Borges a variation of two themes that had fascinated him in his youth: destiny and the brotherhood of man. In terms of Teilhardian intuitive logic we could say that Murdoch was

capable of going beyond the initial orbit to a much larger one, able to participate in patterns of varying magnitudes that eventually "met together at a deeper level" in a single cosmic orbit.

"The Ethnographer" is also, in one of its many readings, a story of courage and transformation like that of the young Sinfjotli (in the "Volsunga Saga", one of Borges' favorites) who after several tests of courage, assumes his full stature and voice as a man. Murdoch's initiation is presented in Borges' story as a decisive experience as it would be for any individual who is a member of a pre-modern society. It is a fundamental existential experience because through it a man becomes able to assume his mode of being in its entirety. In shamanic experiences the old personality dissolves and a new one is prepared for birth. In the same way Murdoch transcends separation, and learns meaning from those Indians his ancestors fought and his professors reify.

The life experiences of Arguedas and Borges resonate in their art. One presents the shamanic experience, as a communal experience that the shaman performs for the good of his community and in their presence; the other presents it as a personal and solitary experience of unity which is set in motion by dreams, and leads to a transforming understanding that totally changes the way his characters had perceived their life and world. In Arguedas there is a direct experience of trance through music and dance, in Borges, the initial quest, more intellectual than spiritual, revolves around words, the secret sentence in the jaguar, in "The God's Script" and the words of the esoteric rites in "The Ethnographer." Later, when they understand the Spirit, the characters stop searching for linguistic formulas and concentrate on what they are actually learning from experience.

There is another interesting resonance between Borges and Arguedas, of which probably neither of them was aware since they both were creating these characters around the same time. Similar to Murdoch, who stops studying the people of the reservation as "others," from the outside, and—being a Borges' creature—becomes a librarian; Maxwell Max, in *El Zorro de Arriba y el Zorro de Abajo* (The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below—Arguedas' last novel—leaves the Peace Corps and submerges himself in the Andean culture, going beyond the "crust" until he understands the culture from inside and makes it his.¹⁰ Like Murdoch, Max senses the value of the other but—being a creature of Arguedas—he establishes a different, more direct contact with the people of the Andes. He becomes a mason's helper in a small

town and, after living with them, he speaks thus of the Andean communities:

Those people are still compact and whole in their primitivism, more subtle than the Empire State and more sure of themselves than you and I, even though they are looked upon as if they were dancing inside of a wall or on the edge of an abyss.

Seeing the results of compulsive modernization in Peru, Maxwell strongly rejects the system within which he had existed as member of the Peace Corps. He tells a fellow priest,

Their control over half of the countries in the world and the fact that they are treating them with direct or honeyed contempt is rotting the USA ... because instead of learning from ancient peoples like this one, all they want to do is promote chaos and contention inside them and Ramong them with the senseless and impossible objective of pouring them all into one mold and drink them up afterward as if they were a bottle of Coca-Cola.

The narrative of José María Arguedas, describes a process of successively expanding magnitudes, from his earlier stories about the Andean nucleus, such as “Death Throes of Rasu-Niti” and his masterpiece *Deep Rivers* (1958) to the nation as a totality and its confrontation with the international reality of imperialism in *The Fox*... (1969). But, in this last novel, as some experts have pointed out there is also an affirmation of the universal character of the Peruvian experience. In the “Last Diary?” with which Arguedas de facto closes the novel, leaving it unfinished because he commits suicide, he writes, “...of Peru, whose roots will always be sucking juice from the soil to nourish those who live in our homeland, where any man no longer shackled and brutalized by selfishness can joyfully experience all of the homelands.”

He refers to the peculiarity of Peru, and especially to the Indian culture and as don Antonio Cornejo Polar points out, “to the possibility that without renouncing to its own character, it could also be embraced by human universality, as emphatic affirmation of the richness there is in plurality, and in ancient cultures with deep roots in history, (‘sucking the juice from the soil’) which demands authenticity of the human being.”¹¹

“It is ultimately an allegory of nationality reformulated at the center of modernization, where life and death are not in opposition but yield the word to plot an unknown world ancient and future, apocalyptic and nascent... A myth of Andean origins (that life comes from death) is transformed into a narrative of the Peruvian future... a process of

cultural articulation, in which the celebration of dialogue is a defining act,”¹² an argument for the meaning (human, spiritual) of the country, the utopia under construction of the symbolic body of a possible nation, of a possible world. Both Borges and Arguedas, each one from his own questioning of the establishment, and his own vision of a humanized otherness, would agree that a truly historical date will be that of the celebration of dialogue, that of “the solidarity of human race.”¹³



Notes

¹ James E. Irby, “Entrevista con Borges” in *Revista de la Universidad de México*, Volume 16, Number 10, Mexico City, June 1962, p. 6.

² First Meeting of Peruvian Writers, Casa de la Cultura del Perú, Lima. pp. 235–6.

³ José María Arguedas, “La Agonía de Rasu-Niti” (Lima: La Rama Florida, 1962). Reprinted in *Amor Mundo y Todos los Cuentos* (Lima, Moncloa, 1967).

⁴ For Borges’ thoughts on this continuum, see “Borges on Life and Death,” a dialogue between Borges and me, published in *The New York Times*, July 13, 1986.

⁵ Together, music and dance form an essential component of the life of the Andean communities; they not only transmit meaning and invoke the protection of the spirit, but also are a way of rewriting history and evoking social change.

⁶ Translated by William Rowe.

⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon* (Bristol: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), p. 3. This is a new translation by Sarah Appleton Weber of Teilhard’s French manuscript, which was originally translated as *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1959).

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, *Discussion*, 1932, *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), pp. 202–205.

⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras Inquisiciones*, 1952. *Obras Completas*, pp. 754–56.

¹⁰ José María Arguedas, *El Zorro de Arriba y el Zorro de Abajo* “*The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*” (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1971)—posthumous edition.

¹¹ Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Los Universos Narrativos de José María Arguedas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1973), p. 301.

¹² Julio Ortega, Introduction to the English translation of *El Zorro de Arriba y el Zorro de Abajo*, translated by Frances Horning, critical edition (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), p. xiv.

¹³ “El Pudor de la Historia,” *Obras Completas*, p. 756. I discuss Borges’ contribution to the search for an authentic identity in times of rampant nationalism and his influence on other major Latin American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes in my book, *Jorge Luis Borges y Alfonso Reyes: la Cuestión de la Identidad del Escritor Latinoamericano* (México City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999).