

# Questioning What Is Real with an Eastern Perspective on Julio Cortázar's “La noche boca arriba”

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“La noche boca arriba,” the widely read short story by Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), was first featured in a collection entitled *Final del juego* (1956). A plethora of articles and books have analyzed Cortázar's writings, and “La noche boca arriba” has been addressed from several perspectives and through numerous theoretical frameworks with a myriad of stylistic approaches. However, little to nothing has been said about where the idea for this story came from and the meanings that derive from examining it in that light. This study examines a Daoist story by Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou<sup>1</sup> as a likely source of inspiration for “La noche boca arriba,” and suggests one ancient Indian scripture, the *Mandukya Upanishad*,<sup>2</sup> as a possible precursor to the philosophy expressed in both.

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Chuang Tzu, or Zhuangzi, a word that means *Master Zhuang* and is the title of a book that contains his teachings.

<sup>2</sup> The Upanishads are ancient Indian texts that are part of the Vedas. No one knows the exact date when they were written, but they could have originated as early as 1500 BCE. The earliest known version of the *Mandukya Upanishad* was published within a commentary by Gaudapada, estimated to have been written in the sixth century CE. The translation used here (Easwaran, 2007) was originally published in 1987.

“La noche boca arriba” tells the story of a twentieth-century motorcyclist who gets in an accident and is taken to a hospital. As a consequence of the accident, the motorcyclist loses consciousness from time to time. The narrator describes the events as they are experienced from what seems to be inside the mind of the motorcyclist. The innovative twist in the story comes when the narrator describes regaining consciousness only to realize that he is in pre-Hispanic Mexico and is now a *Moteca*<sup>3</sup> who is running for his life in a war against the Aztecs. If captured, the *Moteca*’s heart will be offered in sacrifice. After this point, the narration alternates between the two realities. Every time the motorcyclist at the hospital loses consciousness, the narration takes over from the point of view of the *Moteca* and vice-versa. The second twist of the story comes when the *Moteca* is about to be sacrificed and tries with all his might to close his eyes and wake up from what seems to be a nightmare, only to realize that he cannot.

As one of Cortázar’s most well-known stories, “La noche boca arriba” has been discussed in several works. It has been used, for instance, to illustrate magical realism. Lee Daniel points out that magical realism, as opposed to *lo real maravilloso*, “is not marvelous or fantastic, but without the pinch of magic the various planes of reality would probably not occur” (129). In the case of Cortázar’s story, the dream of the motorcycle accident “is realistic enough to convince the dreamer that his true reality, until the last moment, was the dream” (129).

“La noche” has also been described by Edward Friedman as “a reminiscence and a graft of *La vida es sueño*” in the sense that in both stories there are two realities that feel so realistic that it is impossible for the experiencer to tell which one is more real than the other (41). José Ortega used “La noche” and three other stories by Cortázar to discuss fantasy and the use of different tropes in them, stating: “la metáfora en este caso, se apoya en un deslizamiento metonímico, o relación espacio-

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<sup>3</sup> The word *Moteca* refers to the tribe to which the character belongs. There is no record of an actual *Moteca* tribe, however, Julio Cortázar seems to have taken a Náhuatl word (*Motecac*), which, according to Alfonso de Molina (60), means “acostado o tendido” (laid down) as the basis for the name of this fictional tribe. Another popular theory is that the word *Moteca* is a fusion of the first three letters of the word *motocicleta* with a common ending for names of indigenous pre-Columbian Mesoamerican tribes such as Azteca, Tolteca, Olmeca, Chichimeca, etc.

temporal, que no hay que confundir con la contigüidad real” (132). In both the motorcyclist’s and the *Moteca*’s realities, there is the element of the night. In both cases, the one who experiences the events is looking up (*boca arriba*).

This study, however, addresses the philosophical roots behind “La noche boca arriba” from an Eastern perspective. There is one short story in the Chinese Daoist tradition that rings eerily similar to Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba.” It is popularly known as “The Dream of the Butterfly” or the “Butterfly Dream Parable.”<sup>4</sup> It was written by philosopher Zhuang Zhou over two thousand years ago, sometime between the years 369 and 300 BCE. In this story, a man goes to sleep, and in his sleep, he is a butterfly. When he wakes up, he is a man again, but now he is confused about who he is. Is he a man or a butterfly? Who is dreaming of whom? Because it is brief, here is the entire story, as translated by Herbert Giles:

Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is a necessary barrier. The transition is *Metempsychosis*. (Giles 47)

The similarities between Cortázar’s story and Zhuang Zhou’s story are so remarkable that one wonders whether Cortázar was aware of the earlier story. This would seem to be the case since, in an interview with Lucille Kerr, Roberto González Echevarría, and David Grossvogel, translated by Jonathan Tittler and published in 1974, Julio Cortázar revealed that: “from my earliest childhood I was fascinated by philosophy. . . Soon, however I found out that I was not born for philosophy as a discipline . . . But I kept on reading books on metaphysics and on ontology, I ventured later into oriental thought” (Kerr 37). Although this quote does not mention

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<sup>4</sup> I must thank my colleague and friend, historian Norah Andrews Gharala, for the information about the Chinese calligraphy print that her father had at home when she was a child. While discussing preliminary ideas for this paper, she pointed out that Cortázar’s story sounded very similar to something she had read as a child. Thanks to her I learned about Zhuang Zhou’s “Dream of the Butterfly.” This text has been enriched by her contribution.

specifically which Eastern authors Cortázar read, it is not unlikely that “The Dream of the Butterfly” was one of the texts that caught his attention, since Zhuang Zhou is a prominent philosopher in Chinese culture and, according to Hans-Georg Möller, Giles’ translation of “The Dream of the Butterfly” became very popular in the west: “Giles’ translation turned out to be rather influential in the Western philosophical world, since it was eventually used by Martin Buber as a main source for his . . . *Speeches and Allegories of Zhuangzi*” (Möller 439). Another reason why it is likely that Cortázar read Giles’ translation, and not the original version, is the fact that Giles’ translation departs somewhat from the more impersonal translation by Guo Xiang, offered by Möller, that reads:

Once, Zhuang Zhou fell into a dream –and then there was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly, self-content in accord with its intentions. Acting happy with himself and with wishes gladly fulfilled . . . It did not know about a Zhou . . . With a sudden awakening there was, fully and completely, a Zhou . . . One does not know whether a Zhou dreams and then there is a butterfly, or whether a butterfly dreams and there is a Zhou . . . When there is a Zhou and a butterfly, there has to be a distinction [between them] . . . This is called the changing of things. (Möller 446-447)

One must notice that, between Giles’ and Xiang’s translations, there are two important distinctions. First of all, Xiang’s version does not include an “I” identity that persists throughout both the man’s and the butterfly’s experience and that later questions the reality of one experience over the other. Second, Xiang’s version clearly states that the man does not know about the butterfly and the butterfly does not know about Zhou. The continued experience described in Giles’ translation is therefore influenced by Western thinking. As Möller described it: “the idea expressed in Giles’ translation [...] is surely less “Eastern” in tone, being influenced by the metaphysical tradition of the West as represented by philosophers like Descartes” (443). Descartes’ famous dream argument invites us to ask ourselves how we know that we are not dreaming.

Even though the presence or absence of an “I” identity that questions the reality of the butterfly and the reality of the man may seem unimportant, Möller points out that by adding that element, the story is not Daoistic anymore. Möller states: “what is Daoistic is . . . the belief that the authenticity of each segment of a whole is guaranteed by the very fact that

the segments are *not* connected to each other by any continuous bridge between them” (443). In this case, one segment is the experience of being a butterfly and another is the experience of being a man. In order not to connect one segment to another, “presence” is required; that is, being fully aware of the present moment alone, without identification, and without thinking of other moments. Möller goes on by stating that: “if, while awake, we ponder our dreams, as soon as we start to “reflect,” we are no longer perfectly present.” (444). It is unlikely that a story aimed to teach the Daoist philosophy would have its character violate the concept of presence. Instead, the story of “The Dream of the Butterfly,” if told by a strict Daoist, would be narrated in an impersonal way, from the point of view of a perfectly present sage, who has lost all sense of personal identity and is a man when the experience of a man is what appears before him and is a butterfly when the experience of the butterfly is what appears before him but who does not identify with either experience.

“La noche boca arriba” is told by a narrator that is not fully present at each moment. The narrator is aware of the other reality as it transitions from one to the other. The narrator also remembers the alternate reality after he is no longer between worlds. He even tries, with much difficulty, to go back to the reality that he deems more pleasant—the one at the hospital where he is not about to be sacrificed. Bienvenido De la Fuente points out the curious recurrent references to olfactory stimuli during the transitions from one reality to the other in Cortázar’s story: “el paso de una realidad a otra en las distintas secuencias está perfectamente marcado por una sensación olfativa” (574). The smells of the swamp, of war, of soup, of moisture, and finally, of death, are described each time there is a transition.

This connection between realities that makes the story non-Daoist can lead us to at least three different conclusions. The simplest one is that Cortázar read either Giles’ translation or another Western version of “The Dream of the Butterfly.” Another possibility is that Cortázar read the original Daoist version of “The Dream of the Butterfly” and took it as inspiration to create his own story from his own philosophical point of view, perhaps even based on a personal affinity with the ideas of Descartes or other Eastern philosophies that do allow for a seamless continuum of awareness between dreaming and waking states. The third possibility is that Cortázar came up with the idea for “La noche” on his own, and the similarities with Zhuang Zhou’s story are a mere coincidence. The second

possibility, that of Cortázar being familiar with other philosophical ideas, and specifically other Eastern philosophies, will be discussed next.

*Vedanta* is an Eastern philosophy that could very well be an alternate source of inspiration for Cortázar. It is based on three main sources: the Bhagavad Gita, the Brahma Sutras, and the Upanishads. The Upanishads are texts from the Vedas that contain the highest mystical knowledge from the Indian tradition. They are written in *mantras*<sup>5</sup> or verses, and date as far back as the sixth or seventh century BCE. Eknath Easwaran, a respected translator of Eastern texts, explained that the word Upanishad means sitting “at the feet of an illuminated teacher in an intimate session of spiritual instruction” (19). The *Mandukya Upanishad* is comprised of twelve verses and is one of the most well-known Upanishads. It describes the sound *OM* and its significance. Easwaran stated that an ancient Indian teacher from antiquity named Shankara “declared that if one could only study a single Upanishad it should be this one”; that is, the *Mandukya Upanishad* (199).

For this study, I will use Easwaran’s translation of the *Mandukya Upanishad*. In its first verse, the *Mandukya Upanishad* states that the sound *OM* “stands for supreme reality” (203). This is so because in the Indian tradition it is believed that *OM* is the primordial sound that created all that is. The *Mandukya Upanishad* spells the sound *OM* with three letters, A-U-M, and it states that each letter has a specific vibration and meaning. Each letter/sound correspondence is linked to a specific state of consciousness. Verse nine describes the first sound, *A*, as the one corresponding to the waking state, what we usually refer to as physical reality. Verse ten describes the second sound, *U*, as the one corresponding to the dream state. Verse eleven describes the third sound, *M*, as the one corresponding to deep sleep or the part of the night when one is asleep but does not experience dreams. However, the *Mandukya Upanishad* explains that reality is not limited to those three states. There is a fourth state, which is known in Sanskrit as *Turiya*, which means “the fourth.” The simplistic meaning of its name does not make it less important. The fourth state is that which pervades all states of consciousness. It does not have a distinct name or specific qualities, but it can be understood as pure awareness. It is the link between all states of consciousness, and it is evidenced in “La noche boca arriba.”

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<sup>5</sup> For simplicity, I will refer to the *mantras* in the *Mandukya Upanishad* as verses throughout this text.

The first two states, waking and dreaming, are represented in Cortázar's story by the two competing realities, the man in the hospital and the *Moteca*. Only at the end of the story do we learn that, apparently, the waking state was the one experienced as the *Moteca* while the dream state was the one of the man in the hospital. The third state, or deep sleep, is evidenced by the following lines:

Trataba de fijar el momento del accidente y le dio rabia advertir que había ahí como un hueco, un vacío que no alcanzaba a rellenar. Entre el choque y el momento en que lo habían levantado del suelo, un desmayo o lo que fuera no le dejaba ver nada. Y al mismo tiempo tenía la sensación de que ese hueco, esa nada, había durado una eternidad. No, ni siquiera tiempo, más bien como si en ese hueco él hubiera pasado a través de algo o recorrido distancias inmensas. (Cortázar 173)

This gap that could not be accounted for, this experience or lack of experiences, is the third state. It is what we experience every morning upon waking up, when we know that we were asleep for a number of hours but cannot account for all that happened during that time, because even if there were dreams, there are also gaps of no experience before, after, or in between dreams.

The fourth state allows all experiences to be perceived. It is the awareness that perceives all stimuli during the waking hours. It is that which perceives what happens in our dreams, and it is also that which is there when there is nothing to be perceived, connecting all states of consciousness in a seamless continuum.

The experiences described in "La noche" demonstrate both elements of independence and elements of interconnection. On the one hand, the person in the hospital and the *Moteca* have some sense of who they are without being told by anyone about their surroundings or their identity. Friedman points out that: "in the opening, the protagonist is familiar with his surroundings, knows how to drive the motorcycle, how to tell time, to joke about his injuries" (40-41). He does not even need to have a name to know who he is, as is indicated at the beginning of the story: "porque para sí mismo, para ir pensando, no tenía nombre" (Cortázar 167). Later on, when he is a *Moteca*, no one needs to explain to him that he is in the middle of a war, nor does he need to learn from any external source what he needs to do. He simply is aware of the fact that he needs to run away to avoid

being captured. However, that knowledge has an interesting quality—it seems to belong independently to each state and to appear spontaneously when needed and recede into oblivion once it is not relevant anymore. This is evidenced at the end of the story when the narrator states that he had been dreaming a dream in which “había andado por extrañas avenidas de una ciudad asombrosa, con luces verdes y rojas que ardían sin llama ni humo, con un enorme insecto de metal que zumbaba bajo sus piernas” (177). These green and red lights that burned without a flame or smoke, or the metal insect that buzzed under his legs are clear references to traffic lights and the motorcycle, whose name would have been readily available while in the middle of the other reality, but now that the accident and the hospital are just memories from a dream, the names are no longer able to be retrieved. However, something was aware of both realities. Something always knew that there was a *Moteca* while the man was in the hospital, and something always knew that there was a person in a hospital bed while experiencing the *Moteca*. That awareness is the fourth state.

What is most remarkable, however, is how some critics seem to miss the fact that the very last line of the story indicates that even the *Moteca* is also a dream. The last line states: “En la mentira infinita de ese sueño también lo habían alzado del suelo, también alguien se le había acercado con un cuchillo en la mano, a él tendido boca arriba, a él boca arriba con los ojos cerrados entre las hogueras” (177). When Cortázar narrates that even the *Moteca* had been experienced in what actually is an infinite lie of a dream, he clearly indicates that neither experience is reality. The ultimate reality is, therefore, as the Vedantic philosophy proposes, the awareness that pervades all experiences, or that which was aware of all that was narrated.

A common interpretation of Cortázar’s story is that the experience of the *Moteca* was the actual reality because it was the last reality perceived by the senses and, while our awareness of it crystalized, the hospital faded into oblivion. The fact that Cortázar also casts the *Moteca*’s reality as a dream is therefore similar to what Advaita Vedanta proposes. The waking state (first state) in Advaita Vedanta is no more real than the dream state (second state) or deep sleep (third state). Vedanta perceives these as three equal states that alternate in the space of awareness, or the fourth state. Furthermore, the waking state is sometimes referred to as the “waking dream” because the waking reality in Vedanta is thought to be created by a veil of illusion. In other words, in Vedanta nothing is absolutely real, physical, and solid. For Vedanta, what we perceive is a continuum of

experiences that go from what seems to be more solid (in the waking state) to what seems to be more ethereal (in the dream state) to what is the absence of experience (in the deep sleep state). However, only the fourth state is present at all times. In fact, the idea of time is part of the illusion of each state, as evidenced by the fact that the third state can be experienced as a gap in experience. Therefore, when Cortázar states that the *Moteca* exists in the infinite lie of a dream, Vedanta philosophers would agree that it does not matter which is the dream and which is the waking state of the subject who experiences these states. Either the man in the hospital or the *Moteca* can be a character in an actual dream or in the waking dream. Both would be just as real or as unreal.

The only reality that does not go away is the fourth state. The fourth state remains as the waking state fades in and as it fades away. Since it is aware of the fading away of the waking state, it is also aware of the beginning of the dream state. The fourth state exists even when there are no dreams and no waking experience. However, since in the third state there is a gap in experience, there is nothing to remember. And when another experience begins, whether in the dream state or the waking state, the fourth state is aware of it. That pervasiveness is what makes the fourth state the most “real” of all four.

Interestingly, if one follows this train of thought logically, an endeavor that may require another study entirely, then one would conclude that the only actual reality is the awareness of all three states and, in this way, the reader, who is aware of each reality as it is narrated, comes to represent the fourth state in the story. The reader experiences each state as it comes and goes in his/her imagination as he/she reads the story. Indeed, it is only possible for the story to exist because there is a reader. The reader’s awareness births the story into reality and allows it to develop in his/her mind. In this way, the realities in the story are created and re-created infinitely by Cortázar’s words every time someone reads them. However, ultimately, the words in the story are just signs and signifiers that trigger imaginations. Their existence preceded the story as it is written, or as it is read, and will continue after having written them or read them.

In conclusion, while Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba” has been studied extensively and from varying perspectives, previous research has not delved into the possible philosophical roots of all that is being expressed in the story. I have proposed that Zhuang Zhou’s “The Dream of the Butterfly” and other philosophical traditions may have informed Julio Cortázar’s thinking when he wrote “La noche boca arriba” because

of the similarities between his short story and that of Zhuang Zhou's—two realities, two individuals that live seemingly different and independent lives, and the question of which one is real. Additionally, I suggest that Cortázar was influenced by yet another philosophical tradition because the Daoist meaning that “The Dream of the Butterfly” conveys does not correspond to the view of reality described in “La noche boca arriba.” According to this interpretation, a sage can live a life with full presence throughout each moment to such a degree that if a man dreams that he is a butterfly, there is no “he” dreaming that “he” is a butterfly. Instead, the dream state is just another segment of reality in which experience takes the form of the life of a butterfly. According to the Daoist tradition there would be no connection between those segments. Instead, there is a segment in which there is the experience of being a man followed by another segment in which there is the experience of being a butterfly, with no memory or awareness of anything else. This is clearly not what happens in Cortázar's story, in which the *Moteca* is aware of himself being in a hospital bed when he closes his eyes and goes into a dream state at the same time that the person in the hospital bed is aware of himself being a *Moteca* when he closes his eyes and falls asleep.

Advaita Vedanta, I propose, is an alternate philosophy that can support what happens in Cortázar's story. This philosophy describes reality as having four states: waking, dreaming, deep (dreamless) sleep, and the fourth state. The first three states are independent from one another and are only united by the fourth state that is the awareness that pervades all three states. There is, therefore, 1) the awareness of being awake, 2) the awareness of what happens in a dream, and 3) the awareness of having slept soundly with no dreams. Dreamless sleep is sometimes described as a gap in time since there is no recollection of experience during the hours in which one sleeps without dreaming. This would explain the fluidity of awareness between the person in the hospital bed and the *Moteca*, as both individuals are aware of each other as themselves going from one state to another. Furthermore, I propose that the ending of the story, when the narrator states that even the *Moteca* exists in the “infinite lie of a dream,” suggests that the only reality is the fact that there is an awareness of two realities, both of which may indeed be dreams. This is in perfect alignment with Advaita Vedanta, since according to this philosophy, the fourth state is the awareness of the other three states. Like in Cortázar's story, where even the waking state is sometimes referred to as the waking dream, the waking state in Advaita Vedanta is seen as having been created by a veil

of illusion. Advaita Vedanta, therefore, offers a philosophical framework from which to understand Cortázar's vision of reality expressed in "La noche boca arriba."

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