

¹⁴ Tercera interpretación que aparece en el disco compacto *Borges & Piazzolla: Tangos y Milongas*.

¹⁵ Borges destaca en el tango pendenciero su índole sexual, encontrando en la esencia masculina su belicosidad inherente. Matar y procrear se convierten fundamentalmente en el mismo acto, (161). Véanse también el texto y la ilustración de las parejas de hombres bailando aquellos tangos primitivos en Caleb Bach, (17).

¹⁶ Citado en *Borges & Piazzolla: Tangos y Milongas*, 4.

¹⁷ Sin embargo, en su afán poético Borges, según José Gobello, deja de lado su sensibilidad colectiva con respecto a la importancia de la inmigración en la historia del tango, favoreciendo sólo la individualista de sus aislados arquetipos, véase Zlotchew, 282-283.

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Borges' "La escritura del dios;" Life as a (Mayan) Dream

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For some the "cuento central de la narrativa borgeana" (Alvarez 459), "the paradigm or archetype of Borges' accomplishments in the short prose fiction" (Murillo 203), "La escritura del dios" undeniably has generated an entire series of explicatory essays, in part because, with its setting in the mesoamerica of the conquest, the story is unique within his work. Although scholars of the fiction generally agree that it relates the experience of an imprisoned Mayan priest who manages to overcome his human condition and find union with God in a mystical experience, there is no unanimous opinion as to the precise nature of the priest's spiritual path.

One suggested spiritual vehicle of the many which have been offered is the path of the Buddha, a suggestion which has, in its turn, been roundly criticized.¹ There is, nonetheless, some previously uncited textual evidence of a comparative nature which supports the Buddhist argument. As he describes his climactic vision, the story's protagonist uses a descriptive image of weaving which Borges employs again the following year in his essay "La personalidad y el Buddha":

Tzinacán:

Entretejidas, la formaban todas las cosas que serán, que son y que fueron, y *yo era una de las hebras de esa trama total*, y Pedro de Alvarado [. . .] era *otra*. Ahí estaban *las causas y los efectos* [. . .] (A 120, italics added).²

Borges' essay:

Antes del alba, cesa la batalla ilusoria y Siddhartha ve sus previas encarnaciones [. . .] y las de todas la criaturas y *la incesante red que entretejen los efectos y causas* del universo.

("La personalidad" 32, italics added).

Borges' use of the same image—in fact even to some extent the same words ("las causas y los efectos," "los efectos y causas")—in compositions of such temporal proximity (1949 and 1950, respectively), makes evident the kinship of what Siddhartha and Tzinacán see.

The positing of a Buddhist response to the question of Tzinacán's spiritual path, however, generates yet another question which must also be satisfactorily answered: just what has the Buddha to do with a "Mayan" story? Lida Aronne Amestoy, suspecting for some time the Buddha's presence in "La escritura del dios," frankly remarks that such a story is absurd (166-67). Daniel Balderston, whose detailed explication of the tale is totally committed to a Mayan interpretation, reasons that because of its Mayan content, the story must be devoid of any explication which is not Mayan (162, n. 25). Otherwise its lack of esthetic sincerity would condemn it to failure.

The popularity of the story among Borges' aficionados attests to its quality and success. It is not at all absurd. The presently suggested resolution of this complicated problem postulates that the story only appears to be Mayan. In truth, like "Las ruinas circulares" and many other stories of Borges, this relation is Idealist. It discloses not a Mayan reality, but a reality of dream.

It is first helpful to recall the very close link between Borges, philosophical Idealism, and Buddhism. Very early in his career Borges manifested his interest in the concepts of Idealism and in his essay "La nadería de la personalidad" he declared his intention to establish an esthetic creed upon its premises (I 84). Among those philosophers of the Idealist school whom Borges cites with frequency, Arthur Schopenhauer is the most prominent, the only philosopher in whose words Borges declares to have found "algún rasgo del universo" (OI 156). Schopenhauer's is an illusory and insubstantial world of dream, of pure appearance; as the title of his central work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Idea*) indicates, the eternal mirror of a will or perceiver which contemplates itself. As Borges points out in his essay "Formas de una leyenda," the world according to the doctrine of Buddhism is also an illusory world, a world of dream:

[. . .] basta recordar que todas las religiones del Indostán y en particular el budismo enseñan que el mundo es ilusorio. Minuciosa relación del juego (de un Buddha) quiere decir Lalitavistara, según Winternitz; un juego o un sueño es,

para el Mahayana, la vida del Buddha sobre la tierra, que es otro sueño. (OI 207)

The great affinity which Schopenhauer and Buddhism share is well known and not at all coincidental. In the first paragraph of her book *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas*, under the immediate title of "Schopenhauer, the Buddhist," Dorothea Dauer affirms that:

With Schopenhauer Buddhism came to be a power in the intellectual life of Germany. He called the Buddhists his cobelievers, "Glaubens-genossen." One day Schopenhauer told his friend that if he were on his death bed he would be reading his Buddhist *Bible*. In his study in Frankfurt [. . .] he had a sacred corner where sat a statue of the Buddha with his tender eternal smile [. . .]. (5)

The philosophy of Idealism and its mythological counterpart Buddhism coincide in their vision of the world as dream, and it is this truth—that the physical, material world which surrounds us is only appearance, illusion, a dream—which the Mayan priest Tzinacán discovers on awakening from a suffocating series of concentric dreams and experiencing his union with God. The story itself consists of the priest's relation of how the Conquistadors arrived, how they tortured him, and how he found himself in a cell from which he cannot escape. He passes the long years of his incarceration searching for a way out, until he finds himself one night enmeshed within a series of dreams which threaten to suffocate him:

[. . .] soñé que en el piso de la cárcel había un grano de arena. Volví a dormir, indiferente; soñé que despertaba y que había dos granos de arena. Volví a dormir; soñé que los granos de arena eran tres. Fueron, así, multiplicándose hasta colmar la cárcel y yo moría bajo ese hemisferio de arena. Comprendí que estaba soñando; con un vasto esfuerzo me desperté. El despertar fue inútil; la innumerable arena me sofocaba. (A 119)

As Borges explains in his essay "La personalidad y el Buddha," the Buddha, too, was harassed by something of a dream, in his case an illusory host of beasts and monsters, but he conquered it by declaring it unreal:

Mara, dios del amor y de la muerte, quiere abrumarlo con ejércitos de jabalíes, de peces, de caballos, de tigres y de monstruos; Siddhartha, inmóvil y sentado, los vence, pensándolos irreales. ("La personalidad" 32)

Siddhartha conquers his hordes of beasts and monsters on unmasking their unreality; "los vence, pensándolos irreales." Facing an infinite series of dreams which are each time filled with ever more sand, Tzinacán in a similar manner declares their unreality: "[. . .] grité: *Ni una arena soñada puede matarme ni hay sueños que estén dentro de sueños*" (A 119, italics Borges'). At that moment, as Borges added in his essay on Buddha a few lines later, Siddhartha becomes "el Despierto," the Awakened One. Similarly, Tzinacán awakens: "Un resplandor me despertó."

The fundamental concept of the story is, in truth, that life is a dream, and its key word is "to awaken." The careful reader, reflecting on the story, should experience his or her own awakening, a pale reflection of Tzinacán's epiphany, on realizing that the series of dreams begins not in the cell with a grain of sand, but rather with the first stage of the priest's consciousness, his pre-Conquest, Mayan life. Based on historical facts and as Professor Balderston has shown, detailed by Borges with a care which reproduces a faithful portrait of the Mayan cultural reality which it evokes, this apparently Mayan life nevertheless was nothing more than a dream, and always fair with his reader, Borges so indicates it in the story's third paragraph. Although the reader perhaps understands that the Spanish have stripped him of his life prior to the Conquest, and have thrown the Mayan priest in a prison cell, the text really declares that all that world also was nothing more than a dream from the which Tzinacán has awakened, only to find himself in another, the cell: "Me laceraron, me rompieron, me deformaron y luego *desperté* en esta cárcel [. . .]" (A 116, italics added). Beginning with the dream of his Mayan life, he awakens in the "hemisferio" of his cell, and from there into the first dream of sand, etc., through a whole series of hemispheres of sand, ever more overwhelming, until he finally declares them unreal and really awakens from the entire illusory prison of apparent reality which has always incarcerated him.

A Buddhist reading of the story indeed sustains the assertion that life is a dream, but Borges, ever generous with his attentive reader, also provides us the information necessary to corroborate that same assertion using Schopenhauer's Idealist framework. Tzinacán tells us that the imprisoning dreams are "sueños concéntricos," and geometry

tells us that they must therefore share an identical structure. One of those dreams, therefore, is the key to all, and Borges carefully describes that one, the cell, in the first paragraph:

La cárcel es profunda y de piedra; su forma, la de un hemisferio casi perfecto, si bien el piso (que también es de piedra) es algo menor que un círculo máximo, hecho que agrava de algún modo los sentimientos de opresión y de vastedad. (A 115)

Vast, isolating and spiritually oppressive, this prison is apparently solid and physically indestructible ("de piedra"). With its vaulted ceiling ("Bóveda," of course, suggests the *bóveda celeste*, or firmament), its floor of stone (the earth), and its somewhat reduced perspective—as Jaime Giordano suggests (109), not half of the globe, but rather that reduced horizon which an individual perceives—it is a particularly disquieting metaphor for humankind's world.

Besides suggesting that this cell symbolically represents our world, the introductory paragraph also imprints on this microcosm the structure of Idealist reality. Tzinacán shares the world with a jaguar that he glimpses through a barred window only when a little light penetrates the dark while their basic sustenance is lowered into the cell. Intuiting the Idealist nature of this world, Nicolás Emilio Alvarez compares Tzinacán with the prisoners of Plato's cave, who only perceive the world of appearances (464), the world which, for Alberto C. Pérez, the jaguar represents (145). But Borges speaks much more frequently of the Idealist world of Berkeley and Schopenhauer, and it is this world which the microcosmic cell precisely represents. According to Schopenhauer's model, the world is composed of an eternal, universal consciousness or will and its corresponding archetypal objectification or representation. The world is an eternal perceiver contemplating its eternal mirror image. The individual consciousness (in this case Tzinacán), however, does not perceive that eternal world in its archetypal totality, because its own ego, its *yo*, blinds it:

[. . .] however much my individual existence, like that sun, outshines everything for me, at bottom it appears only as an obstacle which stands between me and the knowledge of the true extent of my being. And because in his knowledge every individual succumbs to this obstacle, it is simply individuation that keeps the will-to-live in error as to its own true nature; it is the Maya of Brahmanism. Death is a refutation of

this error and abolishes it. I believe that, at the moment of dying, we become aware that a mere illusion has limited our existence to our person. (WWR II 601)³

The individual consciousness sees only particular representations within the illusory limits of chronological time and space (el jaguar). The individual can only transcend these limitations and achieve the total, eternal vision if he or she achieves the loss of individuality, which is what Tzinacán accomplishes at the story's end.

The first paragraph of the story delineates carefully this prison-world, and afterwards we will compare it with the world of Schopenhauer seen from the individual's view point. Tzinacán says of the cell:

Un muro medianero la corta; éste, aunque altísimo, no toca la parte superior de la bóveda; de un lado estoy yo, Tzinacán, mago de la pirámide de Qaholom, que Pedro de Alvarado incendió; del otro hay un jaguar, que mide con secretos pasos iguales el tiempo y el espacio del cautiverio. A ras del suelo, una larga ventana con barrotes corta el muro central. En la hora sin sombra [el mediodía], se abre una trampa en lo alto y un carcelero que han ido borrando los años maniobra una roldana de hierro, y nos baja, en la punta de un cordel, cántaros con agua y trozos de carne. La luz entra en la bóveda; en ese instante puedo ver al jaguar. (A 115)

A barrier ("un muro")—physically impenetrable, but not so high as to prevent transcendence ("[. . .] éste, aunque altísimo, no toca la parte superior de la bóveda [. . .]")—separates the perceiver, the emphatically individuated consciousness or ego ("yo, Tzinacán, mago de la pirámide de Qaholom"), from the apparently objective reality of the perceived world with its dimensions of space and metronomic chronological time ("[. . .] del otro [lado] hay un jaguar que mide con secretos pasos iguales el tiempo y el espacio del cautiverio"). Time and space really limit the captivity, according to the Idealist Schopenhauer, since they are the forms of our understanding through which all apparent reality appears, and they therefore determine in its totality the illusory world in which the individual is incarcerated.⁴ Complementing the emphasis on Tzinacán's ego, there is yet another detail which underscores the lower, more mundane level on which the individuated consciousness perceives the world. The central wall's window is located "a ras del suelo." Here, as elsewhere in his work, the sun is a key indica-

tor of the basic Idealist world, and as Borges described in his *Nueva refutación del tiempo*, in this world "*esse es percipi*" (OI 238) and both Tzinacán and the jaguar (the perceiver and the perception, the individuated consciousness and the symbolically represented, apparently objective world of time and space) receive the sustenance which permits existence ("cántaros con agua y trozos de carne") as dawn banishes the dark, only and simultaneously with the symbolic sunlight (consciousness) that permits perception: "La luz entra en la bóveda; en ese instante puedo ver al jaguar." Jaime Giordano observes that the priest's activity in the story is "exclusivamente mental" (105). In truth, his entire universe is exclusively mental—either as he reconstitutes it in his memory or directly perceives it in the instants of light—and the action of the story is limited to transcending the wall or barrier as the consciousness experiences the transition from individuated to non-individuated, and resolves itself in the union of subject and object, perceiver and perception, without limits on the archetypal or celestial level, the total vision of the climax.

Cada ciega jornada me concedía un instante de luz y así pude fijar en la mente las negras formas que tachaban el pelaje amarillo. (A 118)

That daily moment of light (consciousness) which concedes to priest and jaguar (subject and object, perceiver and perception) their existence is a day's journey, a "jornada." It is, nevertheless, a "ciega jornada," and not only because each day, fruitlessly groping about, Tzinacán strives to discover an obscure truth in his dark prison. It is a blind journey because the Mayan finds himself subjugated by, blinded, as Schopenhauer would have it, by the sun of his ego (WWR II 601). Only in the story's revelatory climax can the then transcendent Tzinacán, free of individuation, finally see, as becomes apparent with the structural anaphora of his epiphany: "Yo vi [. . .]. Vi [. . .] y vi [. . .]. Vi [. . .]. Vi [. . .], vi [. . .], vi [. . .], vi [. . .]. Vi [. . .]. Vi [. . .] y, entendiéndolo todo, alcancé también a entender la escritura del tigre" (A 120).

Let us turn once again to the three sentences in which Tzinacán declares his incipient awakening:

Me sentí perdido. La arena me rompía la boca, pero grité: *Ni una arena soñada puede matarme ni hay sueños que estén dentro de sueños.* Un resplandor me despertó. (A 119, italics Borges')

Tzinacán awakens with the last sentence; he fulfills the Buddhist model on declaring unreal the apparent reality of dreams in the penultimate sentence; but it is in the first sentence where he declares his success in erasing the blinding barrier of his ego, or *yo*. As we have explained in the detailed exploration of the cell's microcosmic Idealist structure, the key element which prevents the transcendence of the barrier that separates the perceiver and the perceived, and that therefore impedes the total perception of the world in its true, eternal nature, is the perceiver's own concept of his ego or self. The initial sentence declares that obstacle now overcome: "Me sentí perdido;" I felt my *self* lost. On fulfilling that basic Idealist requirement for curing the metaphysical blindness from which he suffers, and on carrying out the complementary Buddhist model which forms the story's plot, he achieves the power to make the Mayan reality, his cell and the whole series of incarcerating dreams vanish forever, liberating himself definitively if not from his cell, certainly from the all-encompassing prison of illusion.

Before concluding, it is perhaps useful to reflect once more on this Borgesean absurdity of the Mayan priest who achieves a Buddhist enlightenment, or rather, on just what "La escritura del dios" is really about. The story undoubtedly contains a wealth of descriptive detail and cultural lore consonant with a Mayan reality. A close reading of the text, however, discloses that the interrelationship of those elements conforms to the patterns of the complementary mythic and philosophical structures of Idealism, all of which are consonant with the premises Borges had earlier established as the basis of his art:

Pienso probar que la personalidad es una trasonación, consentida por el engreimiento y el hábito, más sin estribaderas metafísicas ni realidad entrañal. Quiero aplicar, por ende, a la literatura las consecuencias dimanantes de esas premisas, y levantar sobre ellas una estética [. . .]. (I 84)

"La escritura del dios" is precisely about this notion that the personality is really but a dream. Tzinacán progresses, like the protagonist of "Las ruinas circulares," from a definite conception of himself as a real entity to the discovery that he is not. He loses his *self*. This is patently the import of the story's penultimate sentence, "Qué le importa la suerte de aquel otro [the old Tzinacán], que le importa la nación de aquel otro, si él, ahora es nadie" (A 121). Just as Borges' first metaphysical fiction "El acercamiento a Almotásim" is not about Sufism, or "La muerte y la brújula" is not about Cabbalism or Judaism, so "La escri-

tura del dios" is not about a Mayan cultural reality even though it portrays such a reality in meticulous detail. Rather, those mythic patterns are simply various vehicles for the discovery of a deeper, Idealist organizing principle beneath the surface of apparent reality. The ground of each is not the superficial detail of its circumstances, but the prevailing Idealist reality beneath those appearances. The Mayan content of "La escritura del dios" is only incidental, and to take it as the story's ground and the aspect of the story in which its truth is to be found, is profoundly to misunderstand Borges' art.

NOTES

¹ Jaime Alazraki (*Borges and the Kabbalah* 45-48) and Gene Bell-Villada (202) underscore the Hindu element; Eileen Zeitz argues the Christian mystic's path (653, 566 n. 20) while Lida Amestoy understands Tzinacán to be a kind of Buddhist monk or Tibetan yogi (166); Saúl Sosnowski (383) carefully details the story in terms of Jewish, particularly Cabalistic mysticism; Nicolás Emilio Alvarez synthesizes the Cabalistic elements with the Platonic which he considers to be the base of the story (468-472); and finally, Daniel Balderston attempts to supplant all previous interpretations based on Eastern and European traditions with a reading based purely on Mayan tradition.

² Citations from Borges' standard collections are annotated with the customary abbreviations: *El aleph*, A; *Ficciones*, F; *Inquisiciones*, I; *Otras inquisiciones*, OI.

³ For brevity, Schopenhauer's works are cited with the following abbreviations: "On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason" and "On the Will in Nature": *Two Essays*, FR; *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, *WWR I*; *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II, *WWR II*.

⁴ In his treatise "On the Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reason" (FR 65) Arthur Schopenhauer establishes Space and Time as simply forms contained within the individuated intellect in which all perceived experience appears. Immediate knowledge is acquired only through time in the present moment and disappears immediately to be replaced by a succession of other such moments (34-35). Thus Time and Space as continuities are really nothing more than illusions. Borges subscribes to this belief when, in his essay "La encrucijada de Berkeley," he, too, asserts the present as the only time in which perceptions occur. His argument there exposes as illusions "las grandes continuidades metafísicas; el yo, el espacio, el tiempo [. . .]" (I 115-116); and it is these apparent realities, these dreams, this world of illusion, which imprison Tzinacán, and from which he must escape.

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Jorge Luis Borges: la lectura y los mundos posibles de la ficción

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En "El cuento policial", Borges señala que "[...] los géneros literarios dependen, quizás menos de los textos que del modo en que éstos son leídos. El hecho estético requiere la conjunción del lector y del texto y sólo entonces existe. Es absurdo suponer que un volumen sea mucho más que un volumen. Empieza a existir cuando un lector lo abre. Entonces existe el fenómeno estético, que puede parecerse al momento en el cual el libro fue engendrado" (189).¹ La relación entre lectura y escritura se hace explícita, no sólo en la reelaboración genérica que Borges lleva a cabo en sus relatos policiales, sino también en la manera en que éstos se construyen como ficciones. La trama de los relatos policiales es, de acuerdo con las convenciones del género, el fruto de una intrincada relación entre dos historias, una de las cuales, la oculta, la criminal, se resuelve con la explicación del detective al final de la historia. Sin embargo, los relatos "La muerte y la brújula" y "Emma Zunz" complican esta estructura clásica y generan al final una cadena de interrogantes sobre la historia narrada. En oposición a la trama tradicional que privilegia la causalidad lógica, los relatos de Borges instauran lo que él denomina como causalidad mágica, el espacio de los reflejos y de la multiplicación infinita. En este juego incesante de posibilidades, el trabajo de lectura es análogo al proceso de construir la trama: el lector debe "ensamblar" los datos que el narrador brinda de una manera camuflada, mientras que los personajes de Scharlach y Emma construyen una ficción a partir de una cadena de pistas falsas por las cuales logran llevar a cabo un acto de venganza.²

El trabajo de ficción de Borges comienza con un conjunto de ensayos en los que reflexiona sobre el proceso mismo de escribir en relación al género policial (de esta época son las reseñas que publica en la revista *Hogar* hacia 1936) y que culminan con una polémica con Roger Callois y Américo Castro hacia 1942.³ Mediante estos ensayos, Borges construye una teoría sobre la ficción que luego llevará a la práctica en la escritura de relatos policiales. Desde este momento, lectura, escritura y relato policial son términos asociados para Borges. Cada autor escribe de acuerdo con