

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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Deep Rivers: José María Arguedas on Conflict and Convergence Without End

José María Arguedas's *Deep Rivers* (*Los ríos profundos*, 1958) explores a shifting and conflictive frontier between Romance and non-Romance languages, colonizer and colonized: Andean Peru, where (even over four hundred years after the initial Spanish conquest of the region) European and Indigenous languages, sensibilities, and concepts circulate, mix, and rub against each other in often complex and unpredictable ways. To some extent, highland Peru in the first half of the twentieth century is not even postcolonial, in that colonization is ongoing (as Arguedas's novel shows us), and in the countryside and the region's smaller towns and cities the modern nation-state has established itself only precariously at best: its presence still feels like that of an invading army. Far more powerful than state institutions are the Catholic church and the large, semi-feudal haciendas that dominate the landscape, its people, and its economy.

The book's protagonist and (mostly) first-person narrator is Ernesto, a fourteen-year-old *mestizo* (or "mixed") boy. But he is an odd sort of protagonist: never at home, almost always an outsider, strangely passive if quickly roused to passion. He decides neither his own destiny nor that of the book's various plots. We meet him first as he visits Cusco, the former Inca capital, where he has been brought by his father, an itinerant lawyer, who seems constantly to be on the run. Together, father and son have (we are told) traversed many of the country's southern highland provinces—Ayacucho, Junín, Huancavelica, Apurímac, and Cusco—wandering from town to town without ever putting down roots. But Ernesto thereby gains a sense of the broad panorama of Andean culture, which itself is marked by multiple movements and displacements, symbolized above all by the "deep rivers" of the novel's title. Arguedas emphasizes both the dynamism of Indigenous culture, which is far from simply a relic or holdover from the past, and also the persistent struggle between the various populations that inhabit the highlands. *If colonization is not (yet) complete, then the outcome of this struggle is perhaps still to be determined.*

Ernesto is enrolled as a boarder at a Church-run boys' school in the provincial capital of Abancay, which is where most of the novel is set. Here, he has to negotiate tensions both within the school and in the town at large. Two key moments are a revolt of local *chicheras* (women who run the *chicherías*, bars selling corn beer), protesting at the unavailability of salt for cooking, and, at the book's conclusion, the panic that follows news of a spreading

plague of typhus. The novel ends as Ernesto is told to leave the town and seek refuge from this epidemic at one of the haciendas of a distant relative (the same person that he and his father had visited in Cusco, at the book's opening). He chooses, however, to chart his own route towards an uncertain future. The novel ends, but the story continues, inspired by the possibilities of harmony and convergence found even in an everyday trinket such as a child's plaything.



Image 1: Bridge over the River Pachachaca, outside Abancay, Peru

1. Never-Ending Stories

It is not easy to summarize the plot of *Deep Rivers*. It is not that nothing happens; on the contrary, the book practically hums with activity and incident. From the encounter with the Old Man in Cusco—and, indeed, the encounter with Cusco itself—to the kids' mischief and misdemeanours at school, to the traumatic events in the town around them, there is always something going on. The Andes, however provincial and remote from our

perspective, are in Arguedas's depiction far from being a world stuck in time, alien to change, hidebound by tradition. And yet none of its various plots or subplots reach their dénouement, partly because we view them all aslant, from one side: we are not given enough information to make sense of them fully, or to see them to their conclusion.

What, for instance, is the business that the narrator's father has with the Old Man, "the owner of the four haciendas" (17), in Cusco? All we are told is that the father has "some peculiar plan [. . .] an important plan. [. . .]. 'I'll make him do it. I can ruin him!'" (3, 4). But somehow, the matter is not resolved to the father's satisfaction ("his plans had been frustrated" [22]), forcing him (apparently) to keep travelling, and to put Ernesto in the boarding school. Or what happens to Lleras, the school bully who runs off after a confrontation with one of priests, Brother Miguel? Rumour has it that he runs away with a *mestiza* on horseback to Cusco, that he "has put a curse on Abancay" (144), or that he becomes "a lost soul [. . .] shriek[ing] from the mountaintops in the night, caus[ing] rocky crags to tumble down, and rattl[ing] his chains" (155). But nobody knows for sure. Or what of Doña Felipa, leader of the *chichera* rebellion, whom the police spend long hours hunting, chasing up contradictory stories from the surrounding villages? Does she really out-run the law, perhaps to open up a new *chicha* bar in "San Miguel, [. . .] so close to the edge of the jungle that flocks of immense blue parrots come there" (190). Finally, what is the outcome of the plague? Does it cross the bridge and come to town? Does it climb the hill, "in the guise of an old woman, on foot or on horseback" (223), does it "come in by the thousands" (224), or do the Rector's mass and the *colonos'* bilingual prayers ("Out, plague! *Way jiebre! Waaay . . . !*" [231]) fend it off? We are never told. We are given bits and pieces of disconnected narrative, but seldom if ever a sense of where they ultimately take us. Some of this is thanks to the fact that we have a child narrator—Ernesto is simply not given access to the information he might need to make sense of what is going on around him. But these are also stories that seem constitutively to have no end.

Indeed, the book is oddly plotless—if, again, full of drama and tension. We cannot even say that the book as a whole constitutes a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age narrative; if anything, it is the reverse in that Ernesto resists coming of age, in that throughout, as Mela Jones Heestand observes, he "remains unwilling to 'grow up' and assume the violent and contradictory roles associated with (upper-)middle-class mestizo masculinity" ("Historicizing Language and Temporality" 198). Overall, it is as though

there is almost no real progression from first page to the last. But perhaps that is because Arguedas has another timescale in mind: not the weeks, months, or years of the average novel, but the centuries of dominance and resistance, resilience and adaptation, that go back to the 1530s, if not before.

The result is a novel that is episodic: full of moving scenes and set-pieces, such as Ernesto's famous encounter with Cusco's Inca walls, or the equally celebrated description of the *zumbayllu* or spinning top, or the evening that the narrator spends with the musicians in a *chichería*. These are snapshots, or even what we would now call "reels"—in a discussion of another of Arguedas's novels, critic John Kraniuskas comments on the author's use of representational strategies drawn from other media such as photography, with the effect that the novel "acts as a recording machine, registering the co-existence of other semiotic systems and environments at its edges. [. . .] by resorting to the experience of pictorial sight and sound, [the text] becomes inter-medial; photo- and phono-graphic, the text demands that its readers not only read, but look and listen beyond its pages too: it provides other perspectives" ("A Short Andean History of Photography" 361). If novels tend to totalize, to cannibalize other forms of representation and put them at the service of narrative and plot, by contrast *Deep Rivers* resists that process of novelization, as though aware that the novel form itself is a vehicle of colonization.

As Arguedas himself put it, while he was writing *Deep Rivers*, what he calls "the problem of literary expression in Peru" is a "problem of the spirit, of culture, in these countries in which strange currents meet without ever, for centuries, fully blending, forming instead tight zones of confluence, while deep below and far beyond the principal veins flow without end, incredibly" ("La novela y el problema de la expresión literaria en el Perú" 160). The struggle is to put all this in a novel, mindful however that the "deep rivers" of Andean culture always exceed the novel form.

If then this is a truncated narrative, or a text that refuses to narrate, to bring its many stories to their conclusion so long as the currents that run beneath or through them have yet to die down, where does it leave the novel's narrator, Ernesto? He is no longer quite the book's story-teller if he never knows how its stories finish. What therefore is his relationship to what goes on around him? How does Ernesto relate to the action and activity in which he finds himself immersed? Jot down some ideas in your notebook. While you do that, I'll have a glass of *chicha morada*, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Chicha Morada

The *chicha* served in the *chicherías* in Arguedas's novel is a type of corn beer: *chicha* is a generic name for home-brew fermented beverages found throughout the Andes, whose use dates back to the Inca, who drank it ceremonially, for instance after defeating enemies in battle. Its non-alcoholic cousin, *chicha morada*, is also of pre-Hispanic origin, and is made by simmering purple corn with fruit such as pineapple, apples, strawberries, and lime, along with sugar and spices, and straining the resultant liquid. Both *chicha* and *chicha morada* have largely been overtaken by their commercial counterparts—branded beer and soft drinks—but *chicha morada* in particular maintains its position both among the very poorest and, as an element in pricey cocktails, as part of Peru's high-end gastronomic revival (Morales, "The Purple Drink that has the Heart of Peruvians"). It can also be bought in shops ready-made or in powdered form: just add water. More generally, in contemporary Peruvian Spanish, "*chicha*" refers to the, often gaudy, hybrid popular culture of Indigenous people in urban centres such as Lima.

Ernesto is what we might call, with a nod to the practice of Anthropology in which Arguedas was also trained, a participant observer. He is forever observing, perpetually inquisitive and curious, with questions about everything he sees. He interrogates his father, for instance, about the buildings and people of Cusco: "Papa, the cathedral seems bigger when it's seen from farther off. Who made it? [. . .] Does it ever rain on the cathedral? Does the rain fall on the cathedral? [. . .] Do the stones sing at night?" (10). Everything is new to him, and everything is of interest. He is immersed in the sights but also the sounds and smells and affects of his immediate environment. Moreover, he is almost always keen to participate, to get involved with whatever is going on: when the *chichera* rebellion takes over the town, he heads out to the street to investigate and finds himself caught up in the event, "excited by the women's violence. I felt like rushing at somebody, like fighting" (91); he joins in their chant demanding salt and denouncing the "thieves" who have taken it, "shout[ing] it in chorus with them" (92); as other boys leave on hearing shots ring out, he insists he will "stay till the end. Till to the end" (93). He wants to get involved, to be where the action is. He may be passive (an observer), but he is keen to be swept up in activity (a participant) much as stones and branches are swept downstream through river rapids. When he goes to a *chichería* he gratefully accepts a

draught of *chicha* for himself, and continues with his questions: “And why are they having the fiesta, sir?” (101). He keeps watching, keeps asking, keeps listening, keeping up as best as he can with the frenetic activity that surrounds and envelops him.

Yet Ernesto’s desire to take part also no doubt comes from the fact that he never fully belongs. At school, his nicknames are “*foráneo*” and “*forastero*” or “*forasterito*”: outsider or stranger, little stranger. This, in a boarding school in which many of the other boys also come from elsewhere. Somehow, Ernesto is more of a stranger than they are. In fact, in an environment in which almost everyone is an outsider in one way or another, Ernesto feels his difference or distance with particular intensity. As he himself says, as he thinks about his father moving on without him to the next valley, “playing the role of the newly arrived stranger” (as though for his father, this were merely a role), he is left to “feel the force of the sad and powerful current that buffets children who must face, all alone, a world fraught with monsters and fire and great rivers that sing the most beautiful of all music as they break upon the stones and the islands” (38). It is, indeed, perhaps precisely because he is so attentive and curious about the world around him that he feels all the more strongly a sense of alienation from it. In any case, as the novelist and critic Mario Vargas Llosa notes in a commentary on the same passage: in Abancay, Ernesto “discovers the abysmal differences that separate him from the others—his loneliness, his exiled condition [. . .]. He cannot turn back to his Indian community; and now he also knows that he is not an Indian” (“Afterword” 236). He is forever betwixt and between, neither one thing nor the other, but it is for this reason that he is able to tell us about both (torn) halves of the Andean world.

2. *Approaching Reconciliation*

Despite (or even because of) its stress on difference and alienation, fragmentation and conflict, this novel is also permeated with the desire for harmony and reconciliation. Indeed, the renowned Peruvian critic Antonio Cornejo Polar finds what he calls a “dialectic between unity and variety that visibly repeats throughout Arguedas’s work” (*Los universos narrativos* 14). Here in *Deep Rivers*, Ernesto finds evidence of rifts, dislocation, and (often, willed) misunderstanding everywhere he looks: between Indigenous and Western cultures, for instance, but also between rich landowners and poor peons; between Spaniard and Inca; between the Andes and the Coast; between *mestizo* and Black; between children and adults; between the people and the army sent in

supposedly to bring peace; between the genders (not least in the schoolboys' terrible treatment of the "feeble-minded" woman who haunts the schoolgrounds); between "civilization" and nature. But he also finds points of contact and resonance that span these deep divides much, perhaps, as the Spanish-built bridge spans a river gorge on the outskirts of town. It is this same bridge over which Doña Felipa, the rebel *chichera*, makes good her escape. And as Ernesto says, contemplating the spectacle of colonial bridge passing over the turbulent river below it: "I didn't know if I loved the river or the bridge more. But both of them cleansed my soul, flooding it with courage and heroic dreams" (62-3). This is a book that is full of pain and violence, but it is full also of images of beauty, and of (heroic?) dreams of harmony.

Cusco provides instances of both extreme alienation and of utopian harmony. It is here that Ernesto meets a *pongo*, one of the Old Man's servants who is so downtrodden that he is practically dehumanized: when the boy approaches him and tries to talk to him in Quechua, he is silent and "startled." "Doesn't he know how to talk?" Ernesto asks his father. "He doesn't dare." As he leaves, the man "bow[s] like a worm asking to be crushed" (14). On seeing the extent of this degradation, Ernesto "couldn't hold back [his] sobs. I wept as if I were on the shore of a great unknown lake. [. . .] I had never seen anyone more humiliated than the Old Man's *pongo*" (14, 15). Ernesto recoils at this utter abjection, the absolute extirpation of agency and subjectivity; a person reduced to a thing.

But it is in Cusco also that Ernesto encounters the Inca walls in which, by contrast, otherwise inanimate things have vitality and voice: "The wall was stationary, but all its lines were seething and its surface was as changeable as that of the flooding summer rivers which have similar crests near the center, where the current flows the swiftest and is the most terrifying" (7); "Papa, every stone is talking," the boy exclaims (8). In fact, his encounter with the walls involves all of his senses: it is also tactile, for instance, as he "touch[es] the stone with [his] hands, following the line [. . .]. In the dark street, in the silence, the wall appeared to be alive; the lines I had touched between the stones burned on the palms of my hands" (6). These Inca structures are topped by a colonial superimposition, which crowns and secures the dispossession of their original inhabitants, their repurposing after the conquest, but right now, at least, "On the narrow street the whitewashed Spanish wall seemed to have no other purpose than that of brightening the Inca wall" (8). And when Ernesto's father comments on the even more

colossal masonry that makes up the nearby fortress of Sacsayhuaman, he reflects on how he learns from his son's curiosity: "As a child you see some things we older people cannot see. God's harmony exists on earth. We'll forgive the Old Man, since it was through him you came to know Cuzco" (11). The stones inspire forgiveness and reconciliation.

There is no finer image of unity and harmony in *Deep Rivers* than the spinning top or *zumbayllu* that one of the boys, Antero (ironically, perhaps, a landowner's son), brings in to school. As might be expected, Ernesto is fascinated by the toy, which in his eyes is much more than a plaything. Interestingly, here the word comes before the thing—Ernesto asks "What could a *zumbayllu* be? What did this word, whose last syllables reminded me of beautiful and mysterious objects, mean?" (67)—and Arguedas makes much of the onomatopoeic Quechua suffix "*yllu*," which indicates, he tells us, "the music of tiny wings in flight, music created by the movement of light objects" (64). But this is a hybrid word, and the Spanish stem, "*zumbar*," is equally onomatopoeic, meaning (of insects) to buzz, (of machines) to hum or whirr, or (of the ears) to ring. It can also mean either to come very close to something on the one hand, or to rush off or escape on the other. It unites opposites—natural and machinic, external and internal, proximity and flight—just as the word "*zumbayllu*" as a whole combines Spanish and Quechua, while the toy itself, Ernesto imagines, can contain "a little of everything in its soul" (131). As Cornejo Polar notes, the *zumbayllu* "concentrates within itself every resource against evil and becomes symbol of the rupture of the scholastic confinement" within which the boys are stuck. "It is the response to the challenge of closed spaces" (122). Something always escapes! But such escapes construct something new. Against all the fragmentation and partiality that blight the world portrayed in the novel, the *zumbayllu* promises connection and communication: breaking down or fleeing (*zumbando*) the restrictions and divisions of the postcolonial compact, with the spinning top Ernesto feels himself coming as close as he ever can to (*zumbando*) a convergence of elements, natural and artificial, Indigenous and Western, in which he, too, might at last find his place.

But not yet. For Ernesto, and indeed for the entire riven world that he inhabits, conflict supersedes and forecloses the possibility of convergence. The "monsters and fire" that the boy has to confront are as active and dangerous when the novel ends as when it begins. Ultimately (with his suicide a decade after this book's publication, in 1969) Arguedas himself loses hope that the fractures and rifts of colonization could ever fully

be bridged, that there could be any kind of meaningful reparations for the immense losses that colonial violence entailed—and continues to entail, if in new forms in a global context of neoimperialism now dominated by the United States and multinational corporations. But in *Deep Rivers* he still holds out hope, that the often overlooked or subterranean currents of Indigenous vitality could be redeemed and even themselves redeem a fallen world of degradation and violence. Here, at least, that story is not yet at an end.

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Puerto_sobre_el_río_Pachachaca.jpg

Song: "Carnaval de Tambobamba" (José María Arguedas)