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## CORTAZAR: ON CRITICS AND INTERPRETATION

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En algún lugar debe haber un basural donde están amontonadas las explicaciones. Una sola cosa inquieta en este justo panorama: lo que pueda ocurrir el día en que alguien consiga explicar también el basural.

Julio Cortázar, *Un tal Lucas* 66.

Cortázar's writing overtly challenges and invites the reader to participate in the act of creation, engaging him/her to consider the creative act from multiple perspectives. He has explicitly dealt with his poetics in "Apuntes para una poética" (1945), and with a theory of the short story in *Ultimo Round* (1969). Starting with *Rayuela* (1963), a great portion of his fiction has been self-consciously dedicated to exploring the aesthetics of the creative act. Given his interest in the subject, a question is raised by the fact that while his essays and fiction on the creative process defend and praise the craft and role of the artist, his portrait of literary critics as characters or as subjects of his essays has displayed an intense suspicion regarding the critic's role vis-a-vis the work of art.

The present study concerns specific stories and essays by Cortázar in which the literary critic functions as the main character. Central to our goal would be to explore how, in these fictions, Cortázar establishes a dialogue with the reader through which he addresses the subject of interpretation. In order to identify a subtext common to the stories as well as the essays, two questions must be directed to these narratives: 1) What is the role of the protagonist/critic in providing the reader with a particular perspective of the critical act? 2) How does the critical language employed by these protagonists/critics differ from the familiar language of fiction, and what are the implications of these differences? By answering these questions through a careful study of the

narratives' fictional processes, we will be concerned with identifying not only the critic as a literary character, but also with exploring Cortázar's awareness of the dynamics of literary interpretation<sup>1</sup>.

"El perseguidor" has received considerable attention from scholars as Cortázar's testament on the subject of jazz<sup>2</sup>. Narrated in the first person of a critic named Bruno, the story takes place in the world of music, offering us an account of a talented jazzman's last years, his drug and alcohol dependency, his self-destructive impulses and, finally, the beauty and power of his music.

The story is an autobiographical account of Bruno, a critic who is writing a biography on jazzman Johnny Carter. Bruno's view of himself and his profession dominate the story since it is through this critic's perspective that all other events are presented to the reader. As the story opens, the reader is presented with a sordid scene at Johnny's apartment: Johnny lies in bed, sick from his drug habit and desolate because he has lost his saxophone. Bruno, the artist's "friend," is there to promise another saxophone and perhaps additional money. The roles are clearly delineated in this first scene: Johnny will be the exploited genius of jazz while Bruno will be the provider as well as the parasite, the "selfless" critic who follows Johnny around in order to exploit his talents.

The story is chronologically told, its language straightforward, its motives and themes rather transparent. However, soon the reader realizes the deceptive character of this narrative, for in this story the narrator and the reader reach different conclusions about the portrait of Johnny Carter as drawn by his critic/pursuer, Bruno. The gap caused by the narratorial unreliability of Bruno's first person, allows the reader to detect inconsistencies in Bruno's portrait of the artist.

There are several aspects in the telling of "El perseguidor" that allow the critical reader to look at this account as the story of the dynamics of exchange between critic and artist, between pursuer and creator. Moreover, "El perseguidor" dramatizes the critical act from multiple perspectives: the critic's view and exercise of his profession; the critic's portrait of the artist; and finally, the artist's view of the critic.

Bruno, our narrator, lacks imagination both in his critical study of Johnny (the pretext for telling his story) and in his account to us as readers. Early in the story Bruno states: "Soy un crítico de jazz lo bastante sensible como para comprender mis limitaciones" (92). For Bruno, a critic is no better than a mercenary: "ese hombre que solo puede vivir de prestado de las novedades y las decisiones ajenas" (130). In fact, Bruno feels that his profession denies him any possible transcendence and this realization fills him with bitterness.

It is precisely this negative self-image ("me siento como un hueco a su lado" [120]) that translates into an account of Johnny which is tainted and colored by Bruno's intense feelings of inferiority. The critic wants to convince the reader of Johnny's unworthiness, of his decadent lifestyle, and of the lack of correspondence between his genius and his personal merits. Moreover, Bruno goes to great lengths to let the reader know that the genius of this artist was totally undeserved:

un pobre diablo de inteligencia apenas mediocre, dotado como tanto músico, tanto ajedrecista y tanto poeta del don de crear cosas estupendas sin tener la menor conciencia (a lo sumo orgullo de boxeador que se sabe fuerte) de las dimensiones de su obra (148).

Bruno feels envy of Johnny Carter's creative genius. He situates himself and his profession as unworthy when compared to the artist's endeavors: "el Johnny está al principio de su saxo mientras yo vivo obligado a conformarme con el final" (92).

Based on the plot's events, we could assert that "El perseguidor" is simply Cortázar's bitter indictment against the figure of the critic, and against criticism as an empty, meaningless, pursuit. However, if we look further, the negative example of Bruno foregrounds key issues related to the exercise of a satisfactory critical practice: the critic's right to become the artist's author; the critic's responsibility to his readers' and the problematics between the critic and his subject of study.

What in fact is Bruno's critical approach to Johnny's art? It is significant that we are never quite sure of what is actually written in Bruno's book. If on one instance, Bruno writes: "me he impuesto mostrar las líneas esenciales poniendo el acento en lo que verdaderamente cuenta, el arte incomparable de Johnny" (124), later on he contradicts himself: "Se muy bien que el libro no dice la verdad sobre Johnny (tampoco miente) sino que se limita a la música de Johnny" (140). The critical reader is forced to examine gaps rather than presences, omissions rather than assertions. The story's subject, Johnny's portrait, is as elusive to the reader as is Bruno's analysis of its merits.

At times Bruno dialogues with the reader and clearly admits that he has no intention of letting him "read" his critical text: "Este no es el momento de hacer crítica de jazz, y los interesados pueden leer mi libro sobre Johnny y el nuevo estilo" (102). Moreover, when Bruno feels that he is letting on too much information regarding his critical text, he restrains himself from such activity: "Pero de todo esto he hablado en mi libro" (111). Bruno's reluctance to let the reader appreciate his critical acumen is significant and could be indicative of Cortázar's own suspicious view of the language of literary interpretation.

The absence or unavailability of the critic's text leads us to explore the presence of a surrogate reader<sup>3</sup> who comments on the critical text unavailable to us. The final judgment on Bruno's book comes from the artist Johnny, and this has a terrifying effect on Bruno for the latter fears public embarrassment. Johnny, as a reader of Bruno's text, clearly sees the critic's desire for facile and opportunistic criticism. As expected, Johnny accuses Bruno of creating a false portrait of him: "Bruno el jazz no es solamente música, yo no soy solamente Johnny Carter" (142). Johnny becomes the first reader of Bruno's critical interpretation and underscores the critic's dishonest approach and lack of scruples (143). In addition, the jazzman's judgment on Bruno's work has additional significance for it introduces in the story the possibility of an alternative approach to the creative work:

Faltan cosas, Bruno — dice Johnny —. Tu estás mucho más enterado que yo, pero me parece que faltan cosas... El compañero Bruno anota en su libreta todo lo que uno dice, salvo las cosas importantes. Nunca creí que pudieras equivocarte tanto. (143)

Johnny's reproaches to Bruno suggest a holistic approximation to the work of art, one that considers the artist's human concerns as well as his craft: "Pero Bruno.... de lo que te has olvidado es de mí.... De mí, Bruno, de mí" (141). The events in this story question the critic's right to become the artist's author; but more importantly, these events underline the basic differences between the language of criticism and the language of art.

The questions posed by "El perseguidor" could perhaps be clarified in the context of a second story on the subject of critics and their practice: "Los pasos en las huellas" published in 1974 as part of the collection *Octaedro*<sup>4</sup>. This story presents manipulation and selection of critical evidence as dangerous temptations for the critic in the practice of his profession. Fraga, an unknown critic, decides to write a study on Romero, a well-known poet who had enjoyed an unexplained reputation in his country both before and after his death. It is Fraga's intention to uncover the obscure reasons for the poet's impact and popularity: "padeecía de la falta de una crítica sistemática y hasta de una iconografía satisfactoria" (25).

In "Los pasos", Fraga's research is traced chronologically: the initial stage of gathering data, and the "inventive" stage in which Fraga manipulates his facts in order to produce a version that would guarantee success: "ganar simultáneamente el respeto del mundo académico y el entusiasmo del hombre de la calle" (29). Fraga's critical approach to Romero is biographical, a task which makes him a chronicler/detective of Romero's life. After some months of research, Fraga succeeds in his venture: his new interpretation radically changes the canon on the popular author and becomes "el tema del momento."

However, things do not go as Fraga had expected. Once accepted by his peers and by the public at large, Fraga finds himself unable to continue his farce. Overcome by "un desasosiego inexplicable" he is unable to enjoy his newly found success. He recognizes and admits to the reader that his version had not explored the subject sufficiently; that he had stopped researching when he found suitable evidence; and finally, that he had neglected evidence which would have considerably altered his now "commercial" interpretation on Romero: "Oh sí, lo sabía, vaya a saber como pero lo sabía y escribí el libro sabiéndolo y quizá también los lectores lo saben, y todo es una inmensa mentira en la que estamos metidos hasta el último" (40).

A second visit to his original source, Raquel Marquez, confirms what Fraga already knew: he had neglected to include significant evidence that would have changed the reception of his best seller. Plagued by remorse and conscious of the disastrous results such relations would have for his reputation as a critic, Fraga decides to reveal his hoax to the public. There is an ironic twist at the end of the story when Fraga realizes the commercial value of his 'second'

interpretation of Romero. Driven by his ambition and desire to preserve his image, our critic is again ready to misuse his latest and more honest interpretation: "... la cancelación del premio, la negativa de la cancillería a confirmar su propuesta, podían convertirse en noticias que lo lanzarían al mundo internacional de las grandes tiradas y las traducciones" (46). The critic's repentance only serves to sink him deeper into the lie he was trying to correct.

The reader's reception of the events in this story is the result of the distorted accounts of three individuals. First, we witness Romero's own manipulation of his poems in order to create an image for himself. Next, we have the selection of the letters given to Fraga by Raquel Marquez revealing her own desire to withhold events which would produce a new version of Romero. Finally, we have Fraga's knowing acceptance of Raquel Marquez' practical evidence because it suits his own commercial version. Thus Fraga's interpretation of the artist changes with each new telling, and with each reason for telling it.

Against a biography's mirroring capability, its implicit promise of faithful representation, Cortázar clearly senses its potential for distortion and inescapable otherness, its autonomy as object. Thus the subtle interactions of the object's biography and the subject portrayed (in both Johnny Carter's and Romero's lives) contribute and speak for the problematics of identity of the specific critic and of critics in general. In both these stories, the critics seem to be hampered by their own subjectivity, and also by their own desire to make their object of study be like them. In the case of the critic Fraga, this manipulation of evidence is closely associated with an imposition of his own life into the life of the subject he is creating. This is done very effectively as the omniscient narrator draws intentional parallels between the critic and the artist's life: "Las afinidades entre Romero y yo, nuestra común preferencia por ciertos valores estéticos y poéticos, eso que vuelve fatal la elección del tema por parte de biógrafo, no me hará incurrir más de una vez en una autobiografía disimulada?" (28).

Both Fraga and Bruno manipulate evidence in order to produce a sellable, commercial interpretation of their artists. In "El perseguidor," the artist is alive and becomes a critical reader of Bruno's text, while in "Los pasos" Fraga has total and unchecked freedom to forge whatever image of Romero is most suitable to him. The presence of Johnny Carter as a surrogate reader in "El perseguidor," ensures our negative reaction to the critic's unfair behavior. On the other hand, in "Los pasos," Fraga's self-censorship reveals remorse for his dishonest critical practice. In both stories the question of authorship of a critical treatise is a serious one for it involves the risk of dishonesty and deviousness.

While "El perseguidor" and "Los pasos en las huellas" have given us a fictional depiction of failed critics, Cortázar's short essays have sometimes approached the subject ironically once again depicting critics in a negative light. Two fitting examples are his essays: "Noticias de los Funes" (1969) and "Texturológicas" (1979).

In "Noticias de los Funes" Cortázar communicates the same derogatory attitude towards the labor of the critic that we had witnessed in his fictions:

... un tal Julian Garavito de la revista *Europe* viene y escribe pero entonces usted y el hilo secreto que va uniendo sus cuentos.... La crítica es como Periquita y hace lo que puede, pero eso de que ahora se dedique a la costura conmigo prueba lo que va de cualquier realidad a cualquier interpretación. (120)

This essay is of interest because our author attempts to answer a critic's interpretation of his own work. In Garavito's<sup>5</sup> particular case, Cortázar is surprised because this critic manages to find unity in what Cortázar viewed as a totally haphazard collection of short stories (120). Curiously, Cortázar is not totally censorious of this critics. The essay concludes by thanking Garavito for having "illuminated" Cortázar's creative work: "sin ironía alguna le doy las gracias a Julian Garavito, tejedor al lado de la luz" (121).

"Texturologías," on the other hand, effectively demeans the labor of the critic by dramatizing the futility of a critical language. The essay reproduces fictitious quotes from six critical interpretations of a poet named Lobizón. Each critic appears as a critic of the previous critic, each successive essay outdoing the next in its pedantry and obscurity, forgetting its main concern which should have been the artist's work. The critic's quotes, which make up the main body of the essay, are followed by Cortázar's own ironic closing sentence: ¿Qué agregar a esta deslumbrante absolutización de lo contingente?". In "Texturologías," we find a telling instance of the misuse of the language of interpretation.

Cortázar's own biography tells us that he himself started as a critic and as a teacher of literature<sup>6</sup>. As a student he labored over the work of Keats and Poe, translated their work, and wrote critical treatises on them. In fact some of Cortázar's writings on these two authors have been identified by critics as essential in the understanding of Cortázar's poetics and his view on what constitutes artistic creativity. "Para llegar a Lezama Lima," Cortázar's essay on Lezama's *Paradiso*, provides an excellent opportunity to examine Cortázar's own approach to the creative work of others.

The essay begins by discussing biographical facts about Lezama such as his lack of familiarity with foreign languages, and his relatively unknown status in Europe. As the essay progresses, it becomes obvious to the reader that Cortázar's method of analysis consists of quoting extensively from the original. Few opinions are formulated by Cortázar on *Paradiso* and when they do appear, they tend to be subjective and emulatory of Lezama's own style (72). Cortázar seems contaminated with Lezama's style and uses nouns and terms which would be recognized as lezamianos. Here Cortázar reaches the same union with his text that he had prescribed as essential for creators in "Apuntes para una poética". Cortázar urges the reader to come into direct contact with *Paradiso*, for only by establishing a communion with the artistic text it will be possible for any reader to grasp Lezama's poetic imagery and the power of his prose. Fittingly, Cortázar concludes this essay with a humble assessment of his critical practice as he labels his own criticism as "un pobre resumen de un libro

que no los tolera." As a critic, Cortázar feels awed by the power of Lezama's artistry. The critic, displaced by the artist, is forced to summarize rather than to interpret.

Cortázar's non-fictional writings on the subject of the artist seem to suggest that critics and creators should adhere to the same professional criteria. In his classic essay on creativity, "Apuntes para una poética," Cortázar discusses the qualities needed to create literature: faith, intuition, and a belief by the artist that he will be possessed by the art he is creating. The critic, like the artist, must be able to join in and communicate intuitively with the text: "Yo creo que un gran crítico y un gran creador están absolutamente en el mismo nivel" (Apuntes, 130). Cortázar's insistence on the communion between the artist and his object, is of great relevance to our consideration of the author's stance on critics since it allows us to understand Cortázar's suspicion and lack of trust in the language of criticism.

In a key essay on Cortázar's poetics, Sara Castro Klaren describes the significant influence of phenomenology — specifically Merleau Ponty's writings — on Julio Cortázar's stance of the subject of artistic creation. Castro Klaren specifies two main postulates as defining Cortázar's poetics. The first is the poet's "porous" or open condition to the world's experiences. The second, addresses the relationship between the artist and the object of his creation, "the poet thirsting for being, manages to fuse his anxious being to the ontological qualities of the contemplated object" (141).

By juxtaposing the critic's and the artist's use of language in the fictional pieces we have studied, Cortázar explores the limits of critical language to portray the truth. If a good critic should be at the same level as the artist, then it follows that a critic should be able to achieve the same fusion with his subject (the artist) as the artist achieves with his (the work of art). Yet, is this a realistic goal for any critic? For Cortázar, a basic difference between the language of the artist and the language of the critic lies in their respective premises. The artist's truth does not depend on the facts, it has a freedom which is not available to the literary critic. Cortázar's fictional pieces on critics and his own essays on the creative act seem to support this view.

In an interview with Evelyn Picon Garfield, published five years before his death, Cortázar spoke briefly about the language of fiction versus the language of criticism:

La crítica a veces se llama una especie de creación de segundo grado, de segunda etapa, es decir que el cuentista escribe partiendo de una especie de nada y el crítico crea partiendo de una cosa que ya está hecha.... A mí me gustaría ser una especie de síntesis de las dos cosas aunque fuera un día: solo un día de mi vida me gustaría ser a la vez un creador y un crítico. (19)

The passage is significant because it underlines once again Cortázar's dualistic feelings towards the critical act. It also explains what to Cortázar is the critic's



dilemma "a veces hay una especie de corte con la vida, con los impulsos vitales" (16). In the words of Bruno, a critic's labor consists of "sancionar comparativamente, "that is, to sanction comparatively always hoping to arrive at a definitive reading of the work of art. Bruno, Fraga, Garavito, and Lobizon dramatize the problematics of interpretation by creating critical fictions which have as their fit tile objective rational and definitive interpretations.

### NOTES

1 Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* as well as Stein Haugom Olsen's *The Structure of Literary Understanding* are pertinent and influential to my own reading of Cortázar's views on literary interpretation.

2 Critics have shown considerable interest in "El perseguidor" and I have included in my bibliography articles on this story which have appeared in the last ten years. Pertinent to my own reading are the following pieces which look at the aesthetics of this story: Roberto González-Echevarría, "Los reyes: Cortázar's Mythology of Writing"; Lanin Gyurko, "Quest and Betrayal in Cortázar's El perseguidor"; Noe Jitrik, "Crítica satélite y trabajo crítico en El perseguidor"; Amalia Lazarte-Dishman, "Otro enfoque a 'El perseguidor'"; Maria Lima, "El perseguidor" una segunda lectura"; Antonio Skármeta, "Trampas al perseguidor"; and Saul Sosnowski, "Pursuers." None of the above articles have traced the figure of the fictional critic to Cortázar's other texts on critics.

3 Although Iser's work on reader response is seminal for the kind of reading I'm doing here, more specific studies on embedded readers and writers within fictional texts have influenced my investigation. See specific studies by: S. Daniels, Prince, and, Shor.

4 In contrast to the great number of articles written on "El perseguidor", Cortázar's "Los pasos en las huellas" has received little attention. One exception is Lanin Gyurko's "Artist and Critic as Self and Double" (1982). Gyurko's perspective differs from mine considerably.

5 As it turns out, this critic was not 'invented' by Cortázar. See: Julián Garavito's "Julio Cortázar: *Gi es*."

6 See Jaime Alazraki's excellent overview of Cortázar's biography in his introduction to *Final Island*.

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