

Improvisation and Writing: Julio Cortázar's 'El Perseguidor' and the Pursuit for Freedom

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In the words of Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, “la escritura es una operación musical” (*Fascinación* 98).¹ The concept of writing as a musical operation is based on the rhythm of the text. Without the proper rhythm, Cortázar argues, the communication between author and reader would fail (*Fascinación* 99). In his writing the rhythm transmits a tension within the text that places the reader outside of his daily environment. Such is the case in 'El Perseguidor' ('The Pursuer'), in which Cortázar presents two main characters, Bruno and Johnny, in a dialogue that challenges the conventional conceptions of time, reality, and, music.

Jazz appears in 'El Perseguidor' both as one of its main themes and as the basis for its writing. Cortázar compares the rhythm that he attempts in his short stories with the *swing* found in jazz. He explains that jazz musicians are able to intuitively maneuver the time in a piece of music and to add a 'swing'. This swing is “lo que yo siempre he tratado de hacer en mis cuentos” (*Fascinación* 282).² Cortázar adds that jazz is based on the principle of improvisation. Improvisation attracted Cortázar and served as a vehicle for his writing. Improvisation, in this sense, will be regarded as “process, not product” (DeVeaux 11). This paper will explain Cortázar's use of improvisation as a writing technique in regards to 'El Perseguidor'. Moreover, the reading of this short story, given the textual rhythm introduced by Cortázar, opens the process of improvisation to the reader as co-creator of the literary, and musical, piece. Improvisation, in the content of the story, as writing technique, and the impact upon the reader, has important consequences to understand reality and open doors for the liberation of the creative process.

The character of Johnny Carter is modeled after jazz musician Charlie Parker. Bruno, on the other hand, is a jazz critic and has recently published Johnny's biography. These characters embody opposite personalities, Johnny, the intuitive jazz improvisers, and Bruno, the Western intellectual that follows logic and systematic reasoning. The story begins at Johnny's apartment, where Bruno has arrived to visit after a call from Dédé, Johnny's partner, to inform him that Johnny is not doing very well. Bruno enters, calculating that they have not seen each other in a month. Johnny responds: “Tu no haces más que contar el tiempo ... El primero, el dos, el tres, el veintiuno. A todo le pones un número, tú” (100-01).³ Time, in our contemporary capitalist economy, serves as foundation for productivity and efficiency. The capitalist individual moves according to the clock and due dates, as in the case of Bruno, the jazz critic writing for the newspaper. For Johnny, such an idea of time is challenging, and is referred to by Bruno as one of his 'manias' (103). Johnny cannot grasp the conventional conception of time that guides everyday reality: “Esto del tiempo es complicado, me agarra por todos lados” (110).⁴ Johnny's 'mania' is to challenge and question Bruno's logic. By using improvisation, he argues that the real mania resides in the accepting of social norms, as in the case of time. The reader becomes the primary witness of how improvisation has the potential to transgress 'logic' and open a different conception of reality. Logic, in this sense, is understood as the precepts of the dominant culture to be followed by individuals.⁵

1 “To write is a musical operation.”

2 “What I have always tried to do in my short stories.”

3 “You got nothin' to do but tell time ... The first, the two, the three, the twenty-one. You, you put a number on everything” (“The Pursuer” 183). English translations for ‘El Perseguidor’ are taken from “The Pursuer,” *Blow-up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York, Pantheon Books, 1967), 182-247, print. If not accompanied by reference, other quotes are translated by the author of this paper.

4 “This time business is complicated, it grabs me” (190).

5 Cortázar elaborates on his criticism to Western reasoning in *Rayuela (Hopscotch)*, his main work of fiction. In the first

Jazz appears in this way as a form of resistance. In the case of Bebop, the jazz movement founded by Charlie Parker among others, Scott DeVeaux argues that it “takes the form of resistance, not from above but from below” in the way of asserting an “ethnic consciousness” vis-à-vis “a white-controlled culture industry” (23). The same process is found in Cortázar's short story, where a white journalist is responsible for the theorization of the work of a black musician. However, as the story goes on, Johnny complains to Bruno that he does not understand his music:

“– Oye, hace un rato dijiste que en el libro faltaban cosas.

...

“– De mí, Bruno, de mí. Y no es culpa tuya no haber podido escribir lo que yo tampoco soy capaz de tocar. Cuando dices por ahí que mi verdadera biografía está en mis discos, yo sé que lo crees de verdad y además suena muy bien, pero no es así” (171).⁶

In Bruno's attempt to describe Johnny's life, he oversimplifies jazz as a way of living. Rather, Johnny's jazz is grounded in his life and his improvisatory music cannot be easily explained as a way to escape from reality. Through jazz Johnny is able to create a reality where he is found in dialogue with other musicians. The ‘ethnic consciousness’ is constructed in the collective and by taking into account the identity of each individual, an aspect about Johnny's music that Bruno dismisses. Alfonso Hawkins argues that “[r]ebellion against cliché and convention ... is the motivating factor for many jazz musicians,” including Charlie Parker (213). Conventionalisms are used by Bruno in Johnny's biography. Among these, religion; Johnny protests: “No quiero tu Dios ... ¿Por qué me lo has hecho aceptar en tu libro?” (173).⁷ Bruno's language fails to communicate Johnny's music and identity. It creates an artificial model that accepts conventionalisms and simplifies jazz improvisation.

After Johnny's death near the end of the story, Bruno considers changing his book for the second edition. Johnny's complaints regarding his book and Bruno's reflections after listening to *Amorous*, an improvisation piece by Johnny, makes him realize that Johnny is not a victim, “no es un perseguido como lo cree todo el mundo, como yo mismo lo he dado a entender en mi biografía ... Johnny persigue en vez de ser perseguido” (149).⁸ As in the case of time, Johnny's music demonstrates that those that are pursued by the mania of clocks and dates are the ones that accept these norms without questioning or challenging its basis. The same occurs with language, with Bruno attempting to use language to theorize and explain Johnny's music. However, Johnny's biography is sent to print with no changes; Bruno decides to leave it as it was since “no era cosa de crearse complicaciones con un público que quiere mucho jazz pero nada de análisis musicales o psicológicos ... nada de razones profundas” (180).⁹ The jazz public that has the privilege to buy Bruno's book does not acknowledge the complex cultural, social, and political aspects that jazz embodies. Johnny shows the reader that jazz is

chapter of *Rayuela* following the non-linear narrative, Cortázar asks the reader: “¿Por qué entregarse a la Gran Costumbre?” / “Why surrender to the Great Habit?” (389/376). Cortázar uses the notion of ‘Great Habit’ to challenge the readers to liberate themselves from the longstanding structures of power that are hidden behind conceptions of reason and logic.

6 “– Hey, you said a bit back that they were things missing in the book.

...

“– About me, Bruno, about me. And it's not your fault that you couldn't write what I can't blow. When you say there that my true biography is in my records, I know you think that's true and besides it sounds pretty, but that's not how it is” (237-38).

7 “I don't want your God ... Why you made me accept him in your book?” (239).

8 “[Johnny is] not persecuted as everyone thought, as I'd even insisted upon in my biography of him ... Johnny pursues and is not pursued” (221).

9 “it wasn't worth it to create complications with an audience that was crazy about jazz but cared nothing for either musical or psychological analysis ... to hell with profound motives” (244).

more than music, and that it opens the possibility to create, to rebel, and to enter into a reality in which, “Por un rato, no hubo más que siempre...” (176).¹⁰ Improvisation appears here as a pursuit of freedom, a way to create a reality that transgresses the circumstances imposed by the dominant culture and reinforced by the discourse of other individuals.

According to Cortázar, 'El Perseguidor' implies a paradigmatic change in his writing. Whereas in previous stories the characters followed the situation described by the narrator, in 'El Perseguidor' the characters create the story. Cortázar states, “a mí me perseguía desde hacia varios meses una historia ... en el que por primera vez yo me enfrentaba con un semejante” (*Fascinación* 105-6).¹¹ As the story continued to follow Cortázar, Charlie Parker passed away. After reading a short biography in the newspaper, Cortázar was convinced that Parker was the perfect character for the story. This was based on “su forma de ser ... su música, su inocencia ... toda la complejidad del personaje” (*Fascinación* 107).¹² As Robert Felkel demonstrates, most of the characters used by Cortázar, including Johnny, referred to historical persons. These are disguised by the author using the “device of rhyme to connect his fictional and historical referents:” Johnny Carter/Charlie Parker; Lan/Chan Richardson, Parker's fourth wife; Bee/Pree, Parker's daughter; and, Tica/Nica, alias for the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswater, also known as the 'Jazz Baroness' (21). Lan, Bee, and Tica, are all mentioned by Cortázar as members of Johnny's circle. Central to 'El Perseguidor' is the episode in which Johnny records *Amorous*. For Felkel, this name is taken by Cortázar from Parker's song *Loverman* (22). However, if Cortázar used historical information to write this story, how can the author avoid the trap of creating a linguistic image that neither represents jazz musicians nor improvisation? The answer to this question lies in the author-reader relationship that Cortázar attempts to create in his writing.

Improvisation as a writing technique involves both author and reader for Cortázar. In jazz improvisation all musicians are regarded as equal and have the opportunity, Walton Muyumba argues, to “create and extend musical 'conversations' among themselves while in performance.” In their conversations musicians are able to “articulate the music's openness to renewal and revision,” while at the same time “detailing some elements of their individual and/or ensemble musical educations and jazz performances” (18, 20). Improvisation allows the musician to enter into a face-to-face dialogue with other musicians, demonstrating their own abilities and creative skills. It amounts, Muyumba adds, to a “process of self-identification” (20). It creates a collective that gives equal opportunity for expression and communication among all members. If improvisation is to be used as writing technique, the literary work must enclose a dialogue of equals between author and reader.

In his study regarding the use of jazz in Cortázar's writing, Nicholas Roberts argues that jazz improvisation removes the “divide between performer and composer, a work and its representation” that is found in other musical forms. Roberts adds that in this way Cortázar is able to avoid “language's problematics” (733). Improvisation, then, transcends the barriers that language creates in the author-reader relationship. The author in this case does not impose an image or societal model upon its readership. Roberts quotes Cortázar, “en el jazz sobre un bosquejo, un tema, o algunos acordes fundamentales, cada músico crea su obra ... no hay un intermediario, no existe la mediación de un intérprete” (733).¹³ In his quest to follow what he considers as the principles of jazz improvisation, Cortázar rejects the role of the author as the 'intermediary'. In this case, the reader is able to interpret, to create, and to improvise along with Cortázar. As noted above, improvisation should be understood as a

10 “for a while there wasn't anything but always...” (241).

11 “For months a story was following me ... in which for the first time I was put face-to-face with someone else.”

12 “his way of being ... his music, his innocence ... all the complexity of his personality.”

13 “In jazz, which is based on a common scheme, a theme, or some fundamental chords ... each musician creates his/her own work ... there is no intermediary, there is no mediation from an interpreter.”

process, not a product. And such process takes place in a collective dialogue, while maintaining and ensuring the originality of each individual.

Furthermore, the author-reader relationship begins for Cortázar prior to the reading, or performance, of the literary work. It is involved in the very process of writing. When describing his writing technique, Cortázar argues that he avoids appearing as the 'demiurge', and to let the reader interact with a story that "ha nacido por sí mismo, en sí mismo y hasta de sí mismo" ("Del Cuento" 36).¹⁴ According to him, this writing process takes form instinctively and is transmitted to the reader through its rhythm and the "tensión interna de la trama narrativa" ("Del Cuento" 38).¹⁵ The rhythm and the 'internal tension' create the common scheme and the fundamental chords that are shared between author and reader. Cortázar literature, then, is based on a technique that cannot be transcribed into written words. Through rhythm and tension Cortázar introduces the concepts of swing and improvisation into his writing. The music in Cortázar's story establishes an author-reader relationship that is not limited by language. The tension and the rhythm of the story situate the reader beyond the traditional understanding of time and reality, themes that are then treated through language by Bruno to make sense of Johnny's music.

When entering the process of writing based on the principles of improvisation, Cortázar argues, the author "deja de ser él-y-su-circunstancia y sin razón alguna ... *es un cuento*, una masa informe sin palabras ni caras ni principio ni fin pero ya un cuento" ("Del Cuento" 40).¹⁶ As in the case of Johnny, Charlie Parker, or any other improviser, the writer escapes the impositions and conventionalisms of reality, and decides to enter into a continuous process of creation. As the writer advances through improvisation, words, faces, beginnings, and ends, start to emerge and take form. The reader, then, enters into the story as a co-creator and participant in the improvising process. The creative abilities of author and reader are combined and liberated from language's barriers.¹⁷ As Muyumba argues, "Parker provides us access to a musical vocabulary that encourages us to imagine and improvise" (44); that is, to pursue for freedom of thought, creativity, and expression. Parker is present here and shows author and reader the possibility to imagine a world otherwise, in which time, language, and music escape the barriers imposed by an exclusionary system. 'The Pursuer' concludes with Bruno announcing the second edition of his biography with one small change: an obituary in occasion of Johnny's death (183). Cortázar and reader know at this point what changes should have been made, and create together an alternative image about Johnny and his jazz.

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¹⁴ "has emerged by itself, in itself and even from itself."

¹⁵ "internal tension of the narrative plot."

¹⁶ "is not himself-and-his-circumstances anymore and with no *reason* whatsoever ... *is a short story*, a shapeless mass with no words no faces no beginning no end but already a short story."

¹⁷ The relationship author-reader is further developed in *Rayuela*, where Cortázar wants to make "an accomplice of the reader, a travelling companion ... a coparticipant and cosufferer of the experience through which the novelist is passing, *at the same moment and in the same form*" (*Hopscotch* 397).

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