

Jaime R. Brenes Reyes (jbrenesr@uwo.ca)

Session #652 – Roundtable: Disability Discourses in Latin America: Academy and Activism

MLA Convention 2014

January 11, 2014

Julio Cortázar’s Epileptic Writing and Reading Process: The (dis)Activating ‘alimaña’

In his essay “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores” / “On the Short Story and its Environs” (1969/1983), the influential Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar describes “[un] temblor original, [un] balbuceo arquetípico” / “[an] original tremor, [an] archetypal Ur-speech” which seizes him when writing a short story. According to him, a short story “nace de un repentino extrañamiento, de un *desplazarse* que altera el régimen ‘normal’ de la conciencia” / “[is] born of a sudden sense of alienness, a wrenching away that changes the ‘normal’ workings of the consciousness” (42/36-7). His short stories, Cortázar adds, become “alimañas” / “vermin,” that is, uncontrollable and autonomous creatures that come alive in the process of writing and reading (38/*my translation*). Based on my own experience of brain seizures, I find certain similarities between Cortázar’s vermin and what I would like to call an epileptic writing and reading process. In this presentation, I argue that the contextualization of Cortázar’s literature as what is considered a brain disorder opens up a new understanding of his literary project. I aim to link Cortázar to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari philosophy of affect, in which the body takes on different shapes and forms through an active ontology of becoming. I conclude with a personal reflection on Cortázar’s literature and its possibilities to awaken in the reader an ‘alimaña’ that challenges conventional understandings of the body and cognition – a political act that includes reader and writer in a collective process of becoming.

Cortázar’s vermin “se instala desde las primeras frases para fascinar al lector, hacerle perder contacto con la desvaída realidad que lo rodea, arrasarlo a una sumersión más intensa y

avasalladora” (38). For instance, in his story “La noche boca arriba” / “The Night Face Up” – published in the collection *Final del juego / End of the Game* (1956/1967) – the reader crosses paths with a man that is hospitalized after being involved in a traffic accident. After the accident, the protagonist starts to experience intense dreaming hallucinations: from a dedicated worker in twentieth-century Buenos Aires, he becomes a Molteca running away from the Aztecs, who are hunting humans to sacrifice (passim). I hypothesize that the protagonist may be undergoing the effects of brain damage as a result of the accident. Smelling hallucinations, blackouts, identity loss, sleep disorders, among others, can be interpreted pathologically as symptoms of head or brain injury and may explain why he undergoes a surgery at the same time that he is being sacrificed by the Aztecs.

I take the pathological interpretation of “La noche boca arriba” / “The Night Face Up” as a point of departure to criticize the restrictiveness of a medical and ritualistic practice that focuses on restoring the balance of the individual, and to explore the possibility of reading medical symptoms from a perspective that takes into account the singularities of each individual. I propose to read the bi-vocality of the protagonist following Deleuze and Guattari’s schizo-analysis, in which a schizophrenic is defined as a subject who “continually works [social codes] loose and carries them in every direction in order to create a new polivocity that is the code of desire” (*Anti-Oedipus* 40). Deleuze and Guattari aim to consider all the forms in which the human subject, in a constant state of becoming, expresses itself. Pathological medicine, on other hand, attempts to restore a putative internal chemistry of the body as a stable organism. Deleuze and Guattari consider the body not from what it lacks, but from what it can become through the selective and experimental work of the subject.

In the case of Cortázar, a schizo-analysis means a reading of the story that takes into account the two voices that run through the text as schizophrenic expressions of a pluri-vocal subject: through the protagonist, reader and writer become a collective both trying to escape and to remain intact in the reality of the day. I concur with Patricia Pisters's redefinition of Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenia to include "mental illnesses as 'delusional or affective illnesses' that are defined as brain disorders by contemporary neuroscience, including neurological diseases such as epilepsy, autism and (manic) depression" (271n2). As Deleuze reiterates from Nietzsche, artists are "inventors of new possibilities of life" (96); that is, physicians who identify symptoms and translate them into pieces of artwork for the sake of a plurivocal collectivity – reality in all of its potentiality. A pathological doctor, on the other hand, has as an objective to find the cause of the disease and to balance out the internal chemistry of the organism – the thermodynamics of the individual as an instrument of power. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, "The organism is already that, the judgement of God, from which medical doctors benefit and on which they base their power" (*Plateaus* 159). Singularities are repressed because everyone and everything must follow the model of a perfect and balancing organism – the doctor enjoys the benefits and the patient becomes a client.

But, by reading Cortázar the vermin remains and extends itself. In Cortázar's words, "Los cuentos de esta especie se incorporan como cicatrices indelebles a todo lector que los merezca: son criaturas vivientes ..." / "Stories of this type grow, like indelible scars, into the reader who's worthy of them; they are living beings ..." ("Del cuento" 42 / "Short Story" 37). The short story is a surgery: it enters the writer's and the reader's bodies. It is a prosthetic surgery that seizes the One and creates a collective of the many.

To read Cortázar is to experience a brief seizure that deactivate cognition of the reality as we know it. By integrating reader and writer in the genre of the fantastic – which takes place in the daily life, as many of our disabilities – a collective takes shape and form. Thus, epileptic literature exorcises, paradoxically, the ritualistic practice of pathological readings and allows for an activation of the multiplicity of the body.

Works Cited

- Cortázar, Julio. "Del cuento breve y sus alrededores." *Último round*. México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1969. 35-45. Print.
- . "La noche boca arriba." *Cuentos Completos, I (1945-1966)*. Madrid: Santillana, 1994. 386-92. Print.
- . "On the Short Story and its Environs." Trans. Naomi Lindstrom. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.3 (1983): 34-7. *ProQuest*. Web.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson. London: Continuum, 1983. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. Print.
- . *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.
- Pisters, Patricia. "Synaptic Signals: Time Travelling Through the Brain in the Neuro-Image." *Deleuze Studies* 5.2 (2011): 261-74. *EbscoHost*. Web.