

Does Julio Swing?: Writing on Jazz and Jazz Writing in Cortázar's "El perseguidor"

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Abstract

"El perseguidor" is a milestone in the trajectory of Julio Cortázar's prose fiction. With this story, he abandons the concise, uncanny, Poe-inspired style of his earlier works in favor of a more discursive, expansive, jazz-inspired style. "Jazz" refers not to a type of musical composition, but rather to a way of playing any musical composition. There is a critical element to jazz improvisation, a constant counterpoint between expressive creativity and critical commentary. This dyad, I argue, is reflected in the story in the relationship between Bruno, the critic, and Johnny, the artist. There is slippage however, as Bruno's text strives to be art, albeit an art moderated by Johnny's explicit and implicit critiques. In "El perseguidor," Cortázar tries to replicate the highly structured, yet at the same time free nature of jazz improvisation. The question is whether or not he succeeds, or, in jazz parlance, whether the resultant work "swings."

Charlie was looking for that feeling from his heart,
what he couldn't express in words.

—Rebecca Ruffin

No hay palabras para eso ...
por lo menos nuestras palabras

—Julio Cortázar

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.

Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.

—Oscar Wilde

Jazz has a long history of alienation. At its onset in the early years of the 20th century, polite society scorned it as "jungle music."¹ In the late thirties and early forties, jazz traditionalists considered the new bebop sounds being made by the likes of Charlie "Bird" Parker and Dizzy Gillespie to be treasonous. By the late fifties, Ornette Coleman's free jazz irritated those for whom "real jazz" was based precisely on the harmonic and rhythmic innovations of the bebopers. By the sixties and seventies, jazz fusion was making aficionados question whether this new music was jazz at all, as it did away with the complex chord changes of bop in favor of the harmonically simple but rhythmically complex textures of funk.² In the eighties, when Wynton

¹ In the late 1920s and into the 30s, Duke Ellington shrewdly re-appropriated the moniker for his engagements at the Cotton Club.

² Bob Dylan compares the folk purists' reaction to his new music to the jazz community's reaction to Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*: "In a few years' time [Irwin Silber] would castigate me publicly in his magazine for turning my back on the folk community. It was an angry letter. I liked Irwin, but I couldn't relate to it. Miles Davis would be

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Marsalis and the other “neo-traditionalists” came on the scene, some critics complained that jazz was now looking backwards rather than forward. There are obvious analogies to be made between the history of jazz and the trajectory of Cortázar’s prose fiction. By the late fifties, when “El perseguidor” was being written, Cortázar wanted to change direction, to challenge established aesthetics, and to break free of old constrictions. Interestingly, it is in 1959 that Ornette released his forward-looking album, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. While Cortázar was obviously influenced by the traditions of the avant-garde (innovation, experimentation, and improvisation), at this point in his development as a writer, these avant-garde values are fused with the aesthetics of jazz.

When we think about avant-garde music, composers like John Cage, Charles Ives or Harry Partch, whose works are typically dissonant and aleatoric, come to mind. These avant-garde values (chance-taking, dissonance) are reflected in Cortázar’s new style of writing. Alongside this, jazz becomes a central referent and is reflected in the story in the relationship between Bruno, a jazz critic who has recently published a book about saxophonist Johnny Carter, and Carter himself, who is modeled on Charlie Parker and whose name alludes to two giants of the alto saxophone who precede Parker: Johnny Hodges and Benny Carter. In *Music and Identity in Twentieth-Century Literature from Our America*, Marco Katz Montiel talks about how in Paris in the twenties (at the height of the avant-garde movement), music was often considered to be writing’s “other” (74). In “El perseguidor,” Cortázar alludes to this bifurcation, simultaneously showing his narrator, Bruno, projecting contempt toward Johnny’s sublime musical gift, yet writing in a style that mimics jazz’s improvisational nature. Luiza Franco Moreira comments on writers such as Alejo Carpentier, who in the twenties were engaged in “polemics of artistic renewal” (211). These intellectuals – Carpentier among them – converge in calling on composers to recognize the richness of folk traditions and to incorporate them into their compositions (212). Bruno shares a certain prejudice with these avant-gardists who, while championing so-called low-brow or ethnic forms, at the time see them as lesser in significance than “classical” or composed music. Indeed, in the last pages of “El perseguidor,” Bruno calls Johnny “un pobre diablo de inteligencia apenas mediocre ... sin tener la menor conciencia ... de las dimensiones de su obra” (258). Bruno’s words mirror a trend in biographies of musicians. As Katz Montiel states, biographers tend to glorify their subjects, “emphasizing ... so-called natural aptitudes [and thus] implicitly denying the possibility of other capabilities” (2-3).

There are many excellent readings of Cortázar’s long short story. Perhaps the most important of them is Doris Sommer’s “Grammar Trouble,” in which she points out that the at times hostile relationship between the musician and his biographer is reflected in the story’s very grammar. The insistent and awkward use of the present perfect gives the writing a tension that echoes the biographer’s plight, and that is not resolved until Johnny dies, late in the narrative. Yet even such an insightful essay as Sommer’s lacks an in-depth reading of the story’s relationship to the history, complexity, and aesthetics of jazz. It seems increasingly evident that Cortázar envisioned himself as the literary equivalent to a modern jazz musician; photographs of Cortázar playing the trumpet can’t but help cement this viewpoint. My goal is to read “El perseguidor” from a perspective that gives jazz and literature equal weight, that delves into jazz history, and that critiques the effectiveness of Cortázar’s new approach in order to answer a question: is “El

accused of something similar when he made the album *Bitches Brew*, a piece of music that didn’t follow the rules of modern jazz, which had been on the verge of breaking into the popular marketplace, until Miles’s record came along and killed its chances. Miles was put down by the jazz community. I couldn’t imagine Miles being too upset” (66-67).

perseguidor” really something that can be called “jazz writing” or rather simply writing about and around jazz?

“El perseguidor” is a tale of two texts. In the one that we hold in our hands, the jazz critic Bruno reflects expansively on his relationship with Johnny, a jazz musician based on alto-saxophonist Charlie Parker. The second is Bruno’s biography of Johnny. Oddly, in the realm of suspended disbelief, the biography is “real,” while we can only wonder why the story we are reading was written and to whom it is addressed. At one point, Bruno even writes that, “si sigo así voy a acabar escribiendo más sobre mí mismo que sobre Johnny” (181). While ostensibly a text about Johnny (an enigmatic, self-destructive genius), it is also an encoded autobiography: a questioning of Bruno’s own values, his own limitations, and the meaning of his writing. In the reader’s world, Cortázar’s ambivalent text, narrated by Bruno, is real, yet the contents of Bruno’s biographical and musicological book – which we imagine has been written in a conventional style – remain hypothetical.

Even the question of language (*lengua*) is problematic. We assume that Bruno is French and, as Sommer suggests, loosely based on the composer and critic André Hodeir.³ Johnny is spending a long stint in Europe, as many American jazz musicians did – Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, Kenny Clarke and Dexter Gordon among them. We imagine that Bruno and Johnny converse in English. Bruno’s biography would logically have been written in French; it has been translated into English and a Norwegian edition is forthcoming. And yet the text we are reading is in Spanish, a meta-language that contains both the French of the biography and the “translated” text in our hands. Historically, Cortázar deserves some credit for teaching Spanish-language readers in the mid sixties that, as Manuel Vicent says, “en castellano también se podía escribir con la misma libertad con que suena el jazz” (1).⁴

Bruno’s hypothetical biography represents a highly competent form of writing without pretensions of innovation. Bruno is pleased and proud that the volume is “selling like Coca-Cola.” He mentions that he has tried to “escribir ... bien y verídicamente en mi biografía” (147). The words are telling for what they do not say: that writing in pursuit of an illusive transcendence or freedom may call for an abandonment of eloquence and good style. Perhaps eloquence itself is an impediment or a barrier to expression. Sommer sees “El perseguidor” as a “resistant” text, one that purposely defies interpretation. José Lezama Lima notoriously writes that “sólo lo difícil es estimulante,” but he refers not to a willful resistance to interpretation, but rather to expression that yields to comprehension (or at least some sort of aesthetic appreciation) only given the reader’s requisite effort. This may, or may not, be what Cortázar has in mind in “El perseguidor.” Sommer writes that, “we always assume that books are happy to have our attention, [that] difficulty is a challenge, an opportunity to struggle and win ... [Some books] resist the competent reader, intentionally” (22-25).

Bruno’s secondary text shuns the safety net of good style in a quest for deeper insight into Johnny, his music, and most importantly, into Bruno’s psyche. The initial dyad of writer/jazz musician makes us question who is the pursuer to whom the story’s title refers. This ambiguity

³ Hodeir’s book, published in Paris in 1954, the year before Parker’s death, was in all likelihood read by Cortázar before he wrote “El perseguidor,” around 1958.

⁴ In Cortázar’s ode to jazz in chapter 17 of *Rayuela*, the idea of “freedom” is key: “un hombre es siempre más que un hombre y siempre menos que un hombre porque encierra eso que en el jazz alude y soslaya y hasta anticipa, y menos que un hombre porque de esa *libertad* ha hecho un jugo estético y moral, un tablero de ajedrez donde se reserva ser el alfil o el caballo, una definición de *libertad* que se enseña en las escuelas donde jamás se ha enseñado y jamás se enseñará a los niños el primer compás de un ragtime y la primera frase de un blues, etcétera, etcétera.” (204-205 emphasis added).

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is perfectly in line with the aesthetics of Cortázar's earlier short stories. However, we sense that "El perseguidor" is something new for Cortázar. "Jazz" refers not to a type of musical composition, but rather to a way of playing any musical composition. Technical mastery of an instrument is only a part of being a great jazz musician. There is also a critical element – not merely passion or feeling, but also playing music as commentary. Parker improvised over chord changes, simultaneously and at a great speed processing chords, scales, melodies and rhythms. In "El perseguidor," Cortázar tries to replicate the highly structured yet at the same time free nature of jazz improvisation. Sommer highlights the similarities between Johnny, the jazz improviser, and Bruno, the writer seeking a new form of expression:

Bruno's discordant performance in the present perfect is unmistakably doubled. While it seems to comment coolly on the confusing temporality of the jazz musician, the narrator's timing is in fact contaminated by Johnny's own experience with music. (31)

Sommer limns Bruno's jazz metaphors with metaphors and similes of her own: "Bruno will play an extended variation ... He squeezes words into his paragraphs like bebop squeezes notes into a melody" (31-35). She sees in Bruno's repetitions, variations, and reveries an "experimental performance" that links Bruno's writing to bebop. At its best, jazz is about taking chances: on some nights there is magic, but other nights things fall flat. This might help explain why Johnny is resistant to recording. Recording music is akin to writing, it contains a level of mediation that is absent in a live performance; it is a contribution to an archive rather than the experience of something in real time.⁵ Lezama may as well be speaking of the ephemeral experience of live music when he writes, "Ah, que tú escapes en el instante en el que ya habías alcanzado tu definición mejor." Parker himself thought that his best playing was not released on records. In the studio, his initial takes were often his best, but they were hardly ever the takes released because the other musicians on the sessions were often not yet up to speed on the tunes. Reisner recalls that, "when asked his best on wax, [Parker] replied to a *Down Beat* reporter in June, 1951, 'I'm sorry, but my best on wax has yet to be made'" (26-27). The reporter was thinking of the past, but Parker was projecting into the future, or as Johnny has it, "Eso ya lo toqué mañana" (207). Johnny is ambivalent about Bruno's book. His lukewarm praise reflects the idea that the critic is incapable of capturing the essence of the creation, since the creation lives only in the moment of its execution.

The strange dance between the critic and the musician highlights the considerable slippage between the poles of criticism and creation. Johnny intuitively understands that Bruno is searching for the right words to express something that perhaps cannot be described in words: "Bruno, si un día lo pudieras escribir ..." (148). In "The Critic as Artist," a long dialogue in which Oscar Wilde wittily examines the critical dimension of artistry and the artistic component of criticism, he anticipates the dynamic between Bruno and Johnny. Bruno is a critic, but the text we are reading seemingly has artistic pretensions. Wilde insists that, "when people talk to us about others, they are usually dull. When they talk to us about themselves they are nearly always interesting" (53). Unlike Bruno's biography (whose polished language is hardly present in the story we are reading), his manuscript interests us because of its self-reflexiveness. With this self-consciousness, Bruno, the critic, starts to become an artist. At the same time Johnny, the

⁵ Crouch writes that [playing jazz] is "about victory of chaos, about achieving and maintaining a groove that meets the demands of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral inventions in milliseconds ... Parker knew ... how to listen and hear, instant by instant, and how to respond with aesthetic command to that instant, gone now and never to return" (325).

artist, is highly critical. We imagine that his music, like Parker's, amounts to a critique of that which preceded it.

Unlike Louis Armstrong, Parker was disinclined to play pure melody, opting rather for marginal (often mocking) commentary: jazz soloing as critique. Wilde says, "there is no fine art without self-consciousness and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one ... it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms" (71-72). Wilde adds that "it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation, the more real the interpretation becomes" (93). We assume that Bruno's biography has contextualized Johnny's music within the history of jazz, that it enumerates the technical innovations of his playing, and that it provides a rudimentary review of key moments in Johnny's life: meeting other musicians, being introduced to new styles, or moving from one city to another. What this well-written text lacks is the probing, excessive intensity that the text we are now reading has, precisely because of the lack of self-consciousness in its pages.

Writing about Artaud, Cortázar and jazz, Nicholas Roberts systematically charts the fissures in Cortázar's theories of jazz. Roberts writes that, although much has been written about Cortázar's engagement with jazz, "no real attempt has been made to ... explain Cortázar's claims for jazz as being just such a vital and 'authentic' form of expression..." (730). In *Rayuela* and in other texts, Cortázar describes jazz using those terms, as a form of expression in which the types of barriers that are intrinsic to language are transcended. In chapter 17 of *Rayuela*, jazz is described as "la única música universal del siglo ... una música con historia ... una música que permitía todas las imaginaciones y los gustos" (202). And yet, we learn in "Louis, enormísimo cronopio," that only *cronopios* get jazz, that *famas* are incapable of grasping what it is all about. In "El perseguidor," and later in *Rayuela*, Cortázar searches for a form of writing that breaks down the barriers between writer and reader, just as jazz supposedly breaks down the barriers between musicians and listeners.⁶ Or could he be purposefully erecting barriers between himself and his readers (the literary equivalent to a musician playing with his back to the audience). Cortázar asserts that, like a jazz musician, "el escritor tiene que incendiar el lenguaje, acabar con las formas coaguladas e ir todavía más allá" (qtd. in Roberts 737). And yet the prose of the story is, as Sommer has it, "nervous." We recall Philip Larkin's characterization of bop as "pinched, unhappy, febrile [and] tense." (8).

Cortázar could not have but seen his influence in the work of other writers, as Parker certainly heard himself in the playing of other musicians. Larkin riffs, "Parker had seen jazz refashion itself pretty well in his image and heard his own solos coming back at him from a thousand horns" (29). Cortázar was also likely aware of this influence of his writing, which features Galloise-smoking, cognac-sipping characters who are as comfortable discussing Jelly Roll Morton as they are dissecting the fiction of Raymond Roussel. At the same time, a dose of humor keeps his fiction out of the realm of pedantry. Cortázar's reworking of traditional literary forms is not only a symptom of his modernity (making him a parallel figure to Parker), but is also an indication of his "coolness." As Julián Ríos puts it, "[Cortázar] le quitó el corsé a esa señora un poco pesada que era nuestra novela."

With its Parisian setting and its focus on the world of jazz, "El perseguidor" at the outset

6 In "Louis enormísimo cronopio," Cortázar writes that on the night of Armstrong's concert in Paris, "el teatro está copiosamente invadido por cronopios que no contentos con desbordarse por la sala y trepar hasta las lámparas, invaden el escenario y se tiran por el suelo, se apelotonan en todos los espacios disponibles y no disponibles, con inmensa indignación de los acomodadores que ayer nomás, en el concierto de flauta y arpa, tenían un público tan bien educado" (14-16).

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seems like a particularly promising piece of writing. But it is an anomaly in the book in which it is found, *Las armas secretas*, a collection of shorter works that expose Cortázar's established genius as a *cuentista*. "Las cartas de mamá," "Las babas del diablo," and "Los buenos servicios" are stories that develop from ingenious situational plantings. In contrast, the discursive excess of "El perseguidor" prefigures the heft of *Rayuela*. The Johnny/Bruno dyad anticipates that of la Maga/Horacio Oliveira. Bruno's writing explores the "dialectical consequences" of Johnny's playing in the same way that Horacio theorizes the intuitive spontaneity of la Maga. Yet the story's very length, the awkwardness of its prose, and the fact that nothing much happens all contribute to the reader's alienation. There is a tendency to compare the bulk of pages in our right hand to the thin pile in our left. Like a child on a car trip asking "how many more miles," we ask ourselves, "how many more pages?" Cortázar himself admitted that

[c]uando escribí "El perseguidor" había llegado un momento en que sentí que debía ocuparme de algo que estaba mucho más cerca de mí mismo. En ese cuento dejé de sentirme seguro. Por ese entonces había llegado a la plena conciencia de la peligrosa perfección del cuentista que, alcanzando cierto nivel de realización, sigue así invariablemente. (qtd. in Valentine 171)

Admitting that he was not feeling sure of himself, Cortázar acknowledges the abandonment of something that he had more or less perfected: the type of story like "La isla a mediodía" or "Axolotl" in which he was in complete control of the narration. For both Parker and Cortázar, a rupture with tradition is risky. With practice and musical knowledge, a jazz musician can eliminate the risk of making "mistakes," thereby insuring a professional and competent performance, but it is difficult to predict when something special is going to happen. Analogously, Cortázar's "new" discursive style is risky and potentially alienating, with its *tempo lento*, its stretching and padding. It is discursive in the etymological sense of the word (the Oxford English Dictionary relates "discouser to the classical Latin *discurrere* – "to run off in several directions, to run about."). Rather than following a defined narrative arc, Bruno's narrative goes back and forth, circling around, as if it were pursuing an illusive transcendence.

Although it is odd to consider such an overwritten work "incomplete," "El perseguidor" employs what José Antonio Maravall would call a technique of incompleteness: "the art and politics of the baroque were a decipherment, which evidently presupposed an interplay with difficulty and obscurity" (224). The challenge of "El perseguidor" goes beyond that of stories such as "Noche boca arriba," in which the basic question is who is dreaming whom. The subtle doubling in "El perseguidor" is based on the conceit that the critic, as much as the artist, is engaged in pursuit. Yet Cortázar is moving from a focus on concept, plot, and structure to one of psychological depth. In fact, there is hardly any plot: a chat in Johnny's apartment, a recording session, a late night walk through the streets of Paris. The challenge is to decipher the motivations and hang-ups that lurk beneath Bruno's words. Sommer's assertion that we should not privilege the reader's role in such a text as "El perseguidor" is given a new inflection when read against supplemental chapter 97 of *Rayuela*, in which Morelli muses:

[m]e pregunto si alguna vez conseguiré hacer sentir que el verdadero y único personaje que me interesa es el lector, en la medida en que algo de lo que escribo debería contribuir a mutarlo, a desplazarlo, a extrañarlo, a enajenarlo (607-8).

The reader who follows Cortázar/Bruno through this textual labyrinth is indeed estranged, displaced and alienated.

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In Larkin's (perhaps ill-fated) effort to understand modern jazz, he not only listens to the records (Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, etc.), but also reads considerable amounts of jazz criticism, coming to the conclusion that "this was the language of modern painting, modern poetry, modern music" (11). He outlines two tensions in artistic production: first, between artists and their materials; and second, between artists and their audiences. For Larkin, the problem with modernism is that modern artists ignore, and are even scornful of, their audiences. They focus almost exclusively on their material. For alliterative reasons he mentions Parker, Picasso and Pound to represent the modernist tendencies of music, painting and poetry, respectively. Not surprisingly, he dislikes all three artists, and comments on the compulsion of every modernist "to wade deeper and deeper into violence and obscenity" (17). What Larkin's reflections on jazz ignore are the motivations behind the modernists' work: what it is that makes them play, paint, or write the way they do: in Wilde's terms, the critical component of creation. There is an obvious corollary between the modernists' contempt for their audiences (which Ralph Ellison highlights in Parker) and Cortázar's resistance to his readers.

Two of the milestones of jazz, Louis Armstrong and Parker, differ significantly. In Larkin's terms, Armstrong accepted building on and embracing all that came before him in order to express it in his own unique voice. All the while, he never ceased to see himself both as an artist and as an entertainer. But where Armstrong accepted, Parker rejected (55). Ellison remarks that Parker struggled harder than any other jazz player to escape being perceived primarily as an entertainer (71). You can hear the boredom with the conventions of traditional jazz in his playing: in his mocking quotations, in its extreme velocity, and in the way that he would pack the margins of the music with commentary. He rejected the "riff," the musical equivalent of a cliché or commonplace. This is not to say he wasn't fond of quotation. In his solos you hear motifs from Bizet's *Carmen*, bits of Armstrong's solos, even "the Woody Woodpecker Song." Still, he was said to have "almost singlehandedly ... saved jazz from *riffitus monotonous*" (Reisner 21).⁷ Cortázar, in this sense, is a modernist like Parker. Where the latter rejects traditional jazz with its warm vibrato, its familiar melodies and danceable rhythms, the former rejects the traditional, reader-friendly, narrative style, which he perceives as having little chance of confounding, confronting, or alienating readers. This is part and parcel of modernism, be it literary or musical.

Part of the appeal of both Cortázar and Parker is, respectively, extra-literary and extra-musical: it goes beyond the words of the texts and the notes of solos; it is *hipness*. Unfortunately, many jazz musicians copied not only Parker's solos but also his drug use, in some cases probably erroneously believing that heroin might help them to play like Bird. Jazz musicians of the post-war era might refuse to be entertainers like Armstrong, but they had their style. The Gordons, a doo-wop vocal group, sums up the aesthetic:

He's got his beret on
His glasses are trimmed in gold
He's got a bowtie and it's crazy
He's a bebopper to his soul.

We compare this to the allure of Cortázar. Manuel Vicent captures it:

Un argentino con acento francés que arrastraba guturalmente sus
erres podía ser muy seductor, si encima usaba gafas de carey negro
como Roger Vadim sin necesitarlas, y aun tenía la cara de jo-

⁷ Crouch quotes Eugene Ramey: "Boy did [Parker] hate riffs. He would do anything to get out of the way. Soon as he knew it was coming, he would duck into silence and come up squawking to kick it in the butt as it went past him" (31).

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ven universitario de la Sorbona a los 50 años y el jersey de cuello le hacía juego con el mechón de pelo que le sombreaba la frente y aparecía en las fotos tocando la trompeta y se comportaba con una ética personal coherente con lo que escribía, no es extraño que produjera estragos entre los lectores libres e imaginativos de entonces. (1-2)

Cortázar connects with readers' desires and reflects their own aspirations.

Writing the story in 1958, Cortázar didn't have the luxury of reading such texts as Reisner's *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (1962), or the memoirs of jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, yet to his credit, his evocation of Parker's unique personality in his portrayal of Johnny Carter is uncannily accurate. Bob Redcross recalls Parker in Gillespie's book:

Bird was a deep person as far as mind was concerned too. Man, he could converse on any level about anything, and I mean with in-depth study. And you say, I wonder where the hell he got time to read, or to know about this... Musically [Parker and Gillespie] were very similar because they were very innovative. Personally, I'll put it like this. When the gig was over and there was nowhere else to go to play anything, Diz would retire to go home. And Bird would be looking for somewhere to indulge himself in a mind battle or something, some kind of mind-entanglement things. Where he could do something to his head. That wasn't Dizzy's stick. (197)

Parker's relentless, obsessive curiosity is translated into Johnny's character and temperament. Johnny is always looking to engage (or perhaps malevolently alienate) Bruno in abstractions about time and space, and is always trying to define or describe something for which he does not quite have adequate words, something that is also just beyond Bruno's grasp.

Miles Davis describes Parker as greedy, as someone who simply cannot control his appetites:

Bird could be a lot of fun to be around, because he was a real genius about his music, and he could be [funny], talking in that British accent that he used to use. But he was still hard to be around because he was always trying to con or beat you out of something to support his drug habit. He was always borrowing money from me and using it to buy heroin or whiskey or anything he wanted at the time...He wanted everything. And when he was desperate for a fix of heroin, man, Bird would do anything to get it. (65)

One of the obvious problems with Cortázar's original Spanish-language text, one that we have to look at with some historical perspective, is the author's ignorance of drugs. Parker's main problem in the realm of substance abuse was heroin. Yet in the original Spanish version of "El perseguidor" there is no mention of heroin. Instead, Johnny smokes copious amounts of marijuana. When Martín Caparrós asked him about the substitution in a 1983 interview, Cortázar laughed, telling Caparrós that, in fact, it was a mistake, that when he was writing the story, he was ignorant of drugs, and chose marijuana by chance. He was made aware of the error when his North American translator told him about it. The translator then "hyper-corrected" the text, substituting "heroin" for marijuana at every juncture. Cortázar himself refused to correct the original Spanish, preferring to leave the text as it was. The correction in English versions of the story shows the key problem at the root of translation: is the translation a faithful version of the original, or is it something new that takes the original as a point of departure?

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Bruno frames the issue of drugs as a violation of a social contract: Johnny's drug use is irresponsible not because it is harmful to Johnny, but rather because it deprives us of music: "pienso en la música que se está perdiendo" (148). The perspective sheds light on Bruno's almost parasitical relationship with Johnny. Bruno's framing of the drug question is self-serving as it removes Johnny from the equation: think of the music that is being lost to all of us. Bruno is also hooked: hooked on Johnny. In his biography of Parker, Stanley Crouch compares the relationship of Watson and Sherlock Holmes to that of Parker and his admirers. At a certain point, Watson questions the great detective about his drug use. We mentally substitute Bruno for Watson and Johnny for Holmes.

WATSON: Surely the game is hardly worth the candle. Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed?

HOLMES: My mind rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work... the most intricate analysis and I am in my proper atmosphere. I can then dispense with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. (qtd. in Crouch 216)

If Bruno is incapable of following Johnny's unusual discourse, the culprit is drugs: "todo se vuelve un fantaseo de la marihuana" (154). Johnny succeeds at what Redcross aptly terms "mind entanglements." Johnny is compelled to smoke marijuana, yet also to express his life and experiences through his music. Sonny Rollins recalls that when he asked Parker what he was going to play one night, Parker replied, "I am going to play what happened to me today." With Bruno, Johnny tries to put his search into words, but words fail him in a way music does not. To Cortázar's credit, Bruno cannot help but let honesty slip through the cracks, as when he admits that "el fracaso de Johnny sería malo para mi libro" (164). The truth might well be the opposite: that Johnny's death would be good for Bruno's book, since in the popular imagination, nothing is as fascinating as a musician or actor whose life of vice, excess, and dissipation leads to an early demise. Johnny's death gives Bruno's biography a definitive quality. On the down side, Bruno is now deprived of his principal source of material.

Sommer points out how, with the death of Johnny, Bruno's prose loses its awkward nervousness. He abandons the awkward present perfect tense in favor of straight-forward simple tenses. It is also in death that an artist can become a legend. Ellison develops this notion in his discussion of Reisner's book. After noting that Reisner and his friends "paid willingly for the delight and frustration which Parker brought into their lives," he adds that

their comments – which are quite unreliable as history – constitute less a collective biography than a celebration of his living and a lamentation of his dying, and are, in the ritual sense, his apotheosis or epiphany into the glory of those who have been reborn in legend. (68-69)

Like Parker, Johnny rebels at stagnation. The whole idea of pursuit is motion forward, based on the critical judgment of what has passed. Johnny "abhors the dull routine of existence" and "crave[s] mental exaltation." Watson is not comforted by Holmes's reply, but he has no power over Holmes. The same is true for Bruno, who shakes his head at Johnny's dissipation and ponders the music that will not be played. Bruno is certainly akin to the contributors to Reisner's book in that he "[pays] willingly for the frustration" that Johnny brings into his life. Like Reisner's book, Bruno is complicit in the project to make the all-too-human Johnny into a legend.

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Etymologically, the word goes back to the medieval Latin “legenda,” meaning “what is read.” So while he may no longer be a source of material, in death Johnny is given a new, definitive, textual dimension.

The story begins with Johnny making fun of Bruno. When Bruno visits a sick and down-on-his-luck Johnny, Johnny calls him “fiel, como el mal aliento” (141). This put-down provides an early pretext for Bruno’s dehumanization of Johnny. While Bruno recognizes Johnny’s greatness (“toca... como un dios”), at the same time, Johnny’s erratic behavior irritates Bruno to no end, and finally causes him undervalue Johnny, both as an artist and as a human being. Ellison’s reflections on Parker are once again relevant: “In attempting to escape the role, *at once sub- and super-human* ... [Parker] sought to outrage his public into an awareness of his most human pain” (71 emphasis added). Most commonly, the dehumanization of Johnny takes the form of Bruno comparing him to animals, usually apes.⁸ When, in the story’s first scene, Johnny suddenly pulls off the blanket that he has been covering himself with, revealing his naked body underneath, Bruno is appalled: “como un mono en el zoo, [me dio] un asco infinito” (155). Later in text he refers to Johnny as “ese chimpancé enloquecido” (179), and then as “el mono salvaje” (191) and finally, “el chimpancé que quiere aprender a leer” (182).

At points in the text, Johnny himself plays to Bruno’s prejudices, as when he admits his own lack of understanding, telling Bruno: “La verdad es que no entiendo nada” (146). Or, when he does understand, it is not through any dialectal process, but rather through feeling: “yo empiezo a entender por los ojos abajo, y cuanto más abajo, mejor entiendo” (147). This is an intellectual conceit about the superiority of instinct over intellect. Bruno’s ambivalence is his saving grace, for though he admits that he listens to Johnny’s words without worrying too much about what Johnny is saying, there are moments when Bruno is honest enough to realize his own insignificance in comparison to the artistic greatness of Johnny (148). While Bruno has a tendency to undervalue Johnny’s strange thoughts and obsessions, he also understands his own limitations. It bothers Bruno that Johnny can see things that he cannot see, and that, in the end, he may not even want to see (157). Yet Bruno is smart enough to realize that Johnny gets him into “mind-entanglements.” While he may not listen carefully to every word that Johnny says, the cumulative effect of Johnny’s words is such that Bruno needs to go to a café, to have a cognac, just to “lavarse la memoria que insiste en *las palabras* de Johnny” (157 emphasis added).

Bruno abandons the consistency and rigor that we imagine characterize his biography of Johnny, waffling more than he would care to admit. Johnny is Bruno’s obsession, and yet he cannot quite nail down his feelings about him, and this is precisely what leads to the text’s discursive excess. Johnny’s “mind entanglements” wear on Bruno emotionally and intellectually, and this weariness inflects his thoughts about Johnny and his art. Near the end of the text, Bruno insists that in Johnny, “no hay la menor grandeza” (182). What is more, the fact that he smokes marijuana is to be expected “de alguien tan sin grandeza” (182). More encoded-autobiography than observation, Bruno is anxious about his own lack of greatness. He is just a poor jazz critic. Johnny’s irresponsibility, his tendency to sell, pawn or lose every saxophone that he gets his hands on, his taste for drugs, his erratic behavior, all take a toll on Bruno who, instead of abandoning Johnny, diminishes him instead. Bruno denies Johnny’s greatness, but not because Johnny is not great, but rather because he simply cannot cope with Johnny’s messy life. And yet, Bruno is honest enough at other places in the text to admit that he is envious of Johnny: “envidio

8 This is reminiscent of the treatment that African American athletes get from the mass media. It is common to portray them as if they were monsters, or animals, whose immense talents are matched by subliminally threatening passions and appetites. See David Shields, *Black Planet*.

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a Johnny y al mismo tiempo me da rabia” (162). Bruno directs his anger at himself (“una cólera... contra mí”). Bruno realizes that he is tangential, part of an inconsequential periphery in opposition to Johnny’s center.

Asking Johnny what he thinks of his book, Bruno is like a child in search of approval. “Está muy bien tu libro,” is all that Johnny can say, a reticence that is painful for Bruno. He wishes that Johnny would help him explore the music’s dialectical consequences: “cada vez resulta más difícil hacerlo hablar de jazz, de sus recuerdos, de sus planes, traerlo a la realidad” (176). Bruno cannot accept the fact that Johnny lives in a world of abstractions and strange obsessions. If Johnny would just talk about jazz, then Bruno’s life would be much simpler. But instead, Johnny talks about dreams of fields full of buried urns, each urn full of ashes. He talks about living fifteen minutes in two and a half minutes, of having a suitcase that not only holds a suit of clothes and a pair of shoes, but a whole store full of clothes.⁹ Bruno tries to ignore these mind entanglements, but the reader senses that he is uncomfortable doing so because he wants to know just what Johnny is pursuing.

One of Cortázar’s phrases succinctly captures Bruno’s ambivalence: Johnny is “un pobre diablo enfermo y vicioso y sin voluntad y lleno de poesía y de talento” (176). The sentence is odd. A string of adjectives and adjectival phrases connected by the repeated conjunction “y” follows “un pobre diablo.” The first three are negative: “enfermo,” “vicioso” and “sin voluntad.” Suddenly, within the same sentence, they turn positive: “lleno de poesía y de talento.” Perhaps Wilde is correct in saying that “we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent” (114). In “La isla al mediodía,” Cortázar writes bipartite sentences whose two sides have nothing to do with each other, but which perfectly reflect the distracted mentality of the story’s protagonist. For example, “[a] Carla le dolía la cabeza y se marchó casi en seguida; los pulpos eran el recurso principal del puñado de habitantes” (459). Something akin to this happens to Bruno: by inconsistently circling around Johnny, his text becomes more true to itself, he becomes more true to himself and more true to Johnny than a well-written biography could ever be.

Sommer comments on the epigraph Cortázar quotes from Dylan Thomas:

Johnny does more than quote the line from ... Thomas, he glosses [it] ... [It’s] an opportunity for the jazzman to extrapolate on the general arbitrariness of signs ... His own life could not possibly be contained in Bruno’s biography; it’s not even in the records. And his face ... could not possibly be an adequate representation of Johnny himself. Instead, it’s a mask. (32-33)

Parker held his alto right out in front of him, playing with an impassive expression on his face. Outside of music, Parker was more than willing to clown around, but music was serious business. He played with his eyes wide open, but seemingly seeing nothing, because the magic was happening not in the room around him, but rather inside his own head. Crouch discusses how, in the early days, Parker’s bandmates took to calling him “the Indian” because of his uncanny resemblance to the cigar-store Indians of the day (314-15). Parker’s deadpan expression is a mask, a mask that hides or distracts from the real self-expression, which is contained not in his face, but in the music. At one point in the story, Bruno writes that Johnny’s music

es como una fachada, algo que todo el mundo puede llegar a com-

9 Crouch writes that Parker even foresaw what today we know as *sampling*. Pianist Walter Davis Jr. remembers Parker saying, “Someday in the future, they’ll be able to put your music in a can. Then, whenever they want to, they’ll do it just like they were using a spoon to take out as much of you, or as little of you, as they need. After they have done whatever they want to do with you, with your sound, they put you back. Your future, my dear fellow, is in a can” (286).

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prender y a admirar pero que encubre otra cosa, y esa otra cosa es lo único que debería importarme, quizá porque es lo único que verdaderamente le importa a Johnny ... Es fácil decirlo, mientras soy todavía la música de Johnny. (165)

Bruno's strange equation of himself with Johnny's music highlights the distinction between writing on jazz and jazz writing. Bruno is mistaken. First, it is not the music that hides something, but rather the face. Second, Bruno, and by extension, his biography of Johnny, is not Johnny's music. Yet this equivocation is telling. Perhaps more accurate is that Johnny's music is, rather than a mask, a vessel that enables both Bruno and Johnny to express themselves. Cortázar would like us to believe that it covers up something else: the important thing, the illusive, ineffable object of pursuit. But is this accurate? Lois Parkinson Zamora opines that

[j]azz provides for Johnny a means of transcending the limitations of time and space, the means for freeing himself from the rational, analytic tendency of Western thought ... Jazz is based not only on melodic sequence and synchronized rhythmic patterns, as is most classical and popular music, but also on syncopation and the superimposition of conflicting rhythms. Its structure depends on the apprehension of many unstable elements simultaneously. (95)

There are elements of the music of Africa and the African diaspora that cannot be represented wholly with the tools of traditional Western musical transcription. Cuban ethnographer and musicologist Fernando Ortiz writes, for example, that for transcribing Cuban music, "los recursos usuales de la musicología 'blanca' son insuficientes" (*La música afrocubana* 166). Ortiz continues, citing Emilio Grenet approvingly:

En rigor una habanera... jamás se ha escrito... puede considerarse que su guía creadora es su estructura rítmica; pero si el músico no está imbuido del sentimiento cubano, el producto musical nunca será una habanera en el sentido más estricto del vocablo." (166-67)

Parkinson Zamora insists that the "irony implicit in this story conveys the fact that Johnny's vision is not tenable for long in a culture where reason, rather than passionate transcendence, is the rule" (98). The problem is the insistence that jazz is mostly, if not merely, "passionate transcendence." I think that, not only Parkinson Zamora, but Cortázar himself, fail to perceive completely the rational analysis inherent in advanced jazz playing, and get too caught up in the notion of "passionate transcendence." Crouch describes how a young Parker was not infrequently booed off the bandstands as a novice jazz musician in Kansas City. This experience drove him to become the musician that he later became. But he did so deliberately, through hours and hours of practice, through a very Western and rational technique of learning to play exercises (*études*) in all twelve keys (the twelve-tone scale also being particular to Western music).

Is this a jazz text? Yes and no. The prose is ponderous and does not swing; it does not combine blues accentuation, harmonic complexity, and speed-of-light improvisation. Certainly, Cortázar's technique is inspired by the modernist characteristics of bebop: just as bebop solos are excessive or supplementary in the way they pile on notes, Cortázar's paragraphs are packed with supplemental words. But rather than a literary equivalent of Johnny's jazz, Bruno's text is more like one of Johnny's off-the-bandstand, late-night obsessions: a suitcase in which fits a whole store full of clothes. While its style is influenced by jazz, Bruno's writing is peripheral to jazz. But it still means something even if "it ain't got that swing."

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