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Julio Cortazar, Narratology, and the Short Story

Kyle McCarthy Nunes
University of Puget Sound

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Kyle McCarthy Nunes
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 Julio Cortázar, Narratology, and the Short Story
 Composition 1

**“Esto lo estoy tocando mañana”: Time and Narrativity
 in Julio Cortázar’s *El perseguidor***

This study aims to juxtapose two treatments of ‘time’ in Julio Cortázar’s short story, *El perseguidor*, to better understand how the concept challenges the reliability of the narrator, and yet deepens reader understanding of how the it can function in a text. In brief, *El perseguidor* takes its inspiration from the life and work of the American jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, (d. 1950): it is the fictitious private memoir of the Jazz critic Bruno V., who intimately recounts the decline in Paris and eventual stateside death of his friend and professional object of study Johnny Carter, a jazzman. The relationship between the two men becomes a relationship between two treatments of time, the thematic as represented by Johnny, and the narrativistic, as presented by the narrator, Bruno. The dynamic of the two characters and the treatments of time they proffer produces a model for understanding how the mode of discourse in a story can act upon a reader’s reception of its plot structure and content. The mode of discourse is herein defined as a montage in which narrator discretion dictates a crucial metric—in this case *temporalistic*—by which the structure and content of the story can be evaluated. Bruno’s narrative reconstruction of Johnny’s decline—as in Bruno’s recently published biography—renders Johnny and his association with time discontinuous and episodic. Many interpretations of *El perseguidor* are possible, but the text privileges a focus on time, overlaying multiple and competing ‘senses of time’ in which Johnny and his obsession it are isolated. Thus, the critical reader is most fruitfully able to piece together the relationship between the two men and their respective discourses by following the interpretive framework of ‘chronology.’

In *El perseguidor*, Johnny and Bruno both show concern towards time, which arises as a topic of conversation and a multifaceted motif interwoven throughout the text. With little preamble, the concept comes to define the pursuits at the center of the narrative by appearing in many forms—as ruminations on memory, mortality, labor, the perception of its passage, and its verbal and metaphorical expression. Johnny first voices his concern in the opening episode of the story, when Bruno arrives at the room in which Johnny and his girlfriend Dedée are pent up between music gigs. While he argues over his practice schedule with Dedée, Johnny says, “Pasado mañana es después de mañana, y mañana es mucho después de hoy. *Y hoy mismo es bastante después de ahora, en que estamos charlando con el compañero Bruno y me sentiría much mejor si me pudiera olvidar del tiempo [...]*” (*El perseguidor*, Cortázar 144, italics added). Defending himself against Dedée’s affronts, Johnny gives a regressive account of the future. This perspective emphasizes a unique character trait—his ‘active momentaneity.’ To Johnny, the future is not measured in relation to things he has yet to do—in this case, practicing music to honor a contract—but rather as a sequence of moments which remain amorphous until he *does* something in them, like chatting with Bruno. Thus, Johnny’s singular conceptualization of time, maintained throughout the story, is signalled by his inability to assign meaning to temporal events beside those of which he is a part. Audience to Johnny’s out-

burst, Bruno states reflectively, “He visto pocos hombres tan preocupados por todo lo que se refiere al tiempo. Es una manía, la peor de sus manías, que son tantas” (144). In the presence of Bruno, Johnny’s obsession with time is introduced and then further underlined by Bruno’s commentary, thereby made into something that both engages and overwhelms his psyche. This fact is no more evident than in the symbols by which Johnny’s deep perturbation is manifest.

Within the thematic treatment of time in *El perseguidor*, the most compelling symbol for temporality appears as a classic, Keatsian metaphor. Repeatedly, Johnny dreams of fields of urns filled with the ashes of the dead. The image first appears just before he records the sublime improvisation of the song *Amorous*. It reappears soon after, when Bruno visits Johnny in the hospital following a fit of mental illness experienced the evening after recording the song. While in the ward bed, Johnny reflects upon his outburst and identifies its psychological source. He describes what he saw and felt:

“Campos llenos de urnas, Bruno. Montones de urnas invisibles, enterradas en un campo inmenso. Yo andaba por ahí y de cuando en cuando tropezaba con algo.... con una urna, hasta darme cuenta de que todo el campo estaba lleno de urnas, que había miles y miles, y que dentro de cada urna estaban las cenizas de un muerto” (172).

The metaphor is a strong portent of the pathological depth of Johnny’s concern with time. Simply, his dream of the urns represents his immanent death, and his own fear of mortality. Furthermore, the metaphor impresses an archetypal literary trope—dream imagery—upon the concept of time in the narrative. However, the metaphor also exposes an esoteric perspective which deepens the understanding of temporality in the narrative, for Johnny’s preoccupation with mortality becomes a recessed and unchanging realm around which his thoughts are looped, and in which his mind is trapped. As it recurs throughout the narrative—including at the account of Johnny’s death—the ‘field of urns’ metaphor strings together a dream chronology, one marked by the temporal and spatial *stasis* of Johnny’s psyche. In that realm, time becomes an inescapable vision of dread, and a fixture of the jazzman’s sub-conscious.

Johnny’s concern with time, so vividly imagined in his dreams, also shows itself in the rhetoric of his self-expression. As Bruno continues to reflect upon Johnny’s mania for time, he tells an anecdote about a practice session in Cincinnati, illustrating the behaviour that often accompanies Johnny’s autistic bouts. He begins,

“[...]esto era mucho antes de venir a París, en el cuarenta y nueve o el cincuenta. Johnny estaba en gran forma en esos días[...]y durante una sesión, tocaba] con gusto, sin ninguna impaciencia [...] Y justamente en ese momento[...] de golpe dejó de tocar y soltándole un puñetazo a no sé quién dijo: ‘Esto lo estoy tocando mañana’, [...] y Johnny se golpeaba la frente y repetía: ‘Esto ya lo toqué mañana, es horrible...esto ya lo toqué mañana’ ” (145).

Even though Johnny’s repetition of the phrase amuses Bruno for its evident madness, each verbal construct has its own lasting significance as a way in which Johnny conceptualizes time intellectually, and construes it verbally. When compared with standard usage, Johnny’s first phrase—“Esto lo estoy tocando mañana”—is unremarkable, because it

uses the present progressive tense of the verb *estar* to place the action of *tocar* in the future—*mañana*. When using this tense, the speaker mentally puts himself in a present-moment of the future, and commits the action in that present. The second phrase—“Esto ya lo toqué mañana, es horrible [...]”—is less forthright, for it amounts to an incongruency between the future time of actuation—*mañana*—and the simple past tense in which it is expressed—*toqué*. Thus, Johnny’s pathological and delicate inversion of the rhetoric of time alludes to his attitude of temporal *non-linearity*. In addition to illustrating this peculiarity, Bruno’s anecdote also erects a divergent sense of time with the use of flashbacks. In one of several similar episodes, he displaces the present moment of *El perseguidor* by recalling something that happened in the United States and many years before coming to the place where the story is set, Paris. In the aforementioned instance, Bruno utilizes the memory of a past event to chronicle Johnny’s pathological concern for time.

Yet even beyond conveying the constancy of that condition and the role of language in its articulation, Bruno’s evocation of the event does something remarkable on the level of meta-narrative—it begins to compose a proxy biography of Johnny. Since Bruno’s recently published professional biography of the jazzman is but a fictitious trope within the narrative, brief flashbacks like this effectively constitute the non-text, working to elaborate a dummy chronology against which the present events of *El perseguidor* unfold.

These biographical episodes provide a temporal backdrop to the present moment of the text, and on a thematic plane, they forefront Johnny’s preoccupation with time and its many faces. The manifestation of time most relevant to Johnny’s life work is the connection of his pathology to his music. In response to the above anecdote, the dynamic between Johnny’s pathology and music captures Bruno’s interest, leading him to confess, “‘Esto lo estoy tocando mañana’ se me llena de pronto de un sentido clarísimo, porque Johnny siempre está tocando mañana y el resto viene a la zaga, *en este hoy que él salta sin esfuerzo con las primeras notas de su música*” (148, italics added). Johnny’s fixation with time is the entrée into his music, which itself animates the musician’s ‘active momentaneity’, as Bruno’s final phrase implies. For Bruno, the interplay between these elements is the fountain of Johnny’s creative genius, and the commercial source of his value. However, according to Johnny, music is the very thing that liberates him of his temporality, and pushes him further in his search for the source of his pain. While at the apartment and reminiscing to Bruno about his childhood encounter with music, Johnny says,

“*La música me sacaba del tiempo, aunque no es más que una manera de decirlo. Si quieres saber lo que realmente siento, yo creo que la música me metía en el tiempo. Pero entonces hay que creer que este tiempo no tiene nada que ver con [...] bueno, con nosotros [...]*” (147, italics added).

Despite his insistence that music ‘put him back into time,’ Johnny hesitates, admitting the caveat that this assumption ‘has nothing to do’ with him and Bruno. The exact meaning of his pronouncement is unclear, but its exception is correct: it is not the music that imposes temporality upon him, but rather Bruno, for as Johnny’s biographer and chief jazz critic, Bruno and his narrative restore ‘timeliness’ to Johnny.

As a result of the affirmation of Bruno’s controlling role as narrator, the treatment of time transfers from the thematic to the narrativistic planes. However, the shift from

one treatment to the other does not happen mechanically, as a mere side effect of forward moving plot action. Bruno's narrative reconstruction of the decline of Johnny's career and health carries with it a sophisticated degree of manipulation, which stems from the overlaying chronologies employed by the narrative. The most overt example of the narrator's manipulation originates in the nature of the professional relationship between the two men. Bruno chronicles Johnny's life as a musical and cultural icon, the product of which is the biography. While recalling how Johnny met the marquess Tica, the woman who is his artistic patron and occasional lover in Paris, Bruno considers his professional tie to Johnny and Johnny's impact on the music world:

“Este no es el momento de hacer crítica de jazz, y los interesados pueden leer mi libro sobre Johnny y el nuevo estilo de la posguerra, pero bien puedo decir que [...] hasta el cincuenta [...] Johnny] fue como una explosión de la música [...] Hay] que conformarse con aplicar esa especie de resignación disfrazada que se llama sentido histórico [...]” (158).

By indicating that his friend is a fixture of a cultural phenomenon—Jazz—Bruno effectively *historicizes* Johnny. In order for the text of *El perseguidor* to advance as if it were the intimate account of Johnny's fall from the height depicted in Bruno's biography, some semblance of the biography needs to be made. Bruno's periodic flashbacks to the influences and zenith of Johnny's musical career create an interpolated narrative which contextualizes the events, attitudes, and character developments of *El perseguidor*. Nevertheless, the ploy is maintained with some regret by Bruno, who, ashamed of himself and the other people who surround Johnny somewhat parasitically, writes that

“En el fondo somos una banda de egoístas, so pretexto de cuidar a Johnny lo que hacemos es salvar nuestra idea de él [...] El fracaso de Johnny sería malo para mi libro (de un momento a otro saldrá la traducción al inglés y al italiano), y probablemente de cosas así está hecha una parte de mi cuidado por Johnny” (164).

In part, Bruno recognizes that he serves himself by narrativizing Johnny. Yet the interplay of the two forms of the jazzman—the present of the actual text, and the past of the hypothetical biography—ultimately formulates a double chronology in which Bruno dominates and exploits the literary reconstruction of his friend. However sinister the sentiment might seem, it is best reflected in Bruno's desire that Johnny not evolve, but stay just as he is, his identity restricted to his role as a symbol of awesome but self-destructive genius: “Quizá en el fondo quisiera que Johnny acabara de una vez, como una estrella que se rompe en mil pedazaos [...]” (162). In this way, Bruno asserts a high degree of control over Johnny, one that is finalized by the grammatical constrictions that Bruno eventually places over his friend.

The narrativistic treatment of time and the emotional potency of the men's relationship reach their greatest extent in the verbal control demonstrated at the scene of Johnny's mourning for the death of his youngest daughter, Bee. As though to channel his grief, time is let linger and float in an instance of narrative stoppage and maximization. Therein, the magnitude of the moment as it pertains to the plot—and to the narrator—can be studied closely. While Bruno, Tica and an acquaintance named Baby Lennox are gath-

ered at the café Flore to care for the bereaved Johnny, Bruno describes the moment of his friend's uninhibited grief:

“[... Veremos] levantarse lentamente a Johnny, mirarnos y reconocernos, venir hacia nosotros...y al llegar a la mesa se doblará un poco con toda naturalidad [...] y lo veremos arrodillarse frente a mí [...] y me mirará en los ojos, y yo veré que está llorando, y sabré sin palabras que Johnny está llorando por la pequeña Bee” (187).

Bruno relates Johnny's every action, including the apparent ease with which he moves, cries, and mourns at Bruno's feet. Considering the degree to which both his fame and character are already controlled by Bruno—in his role as Johnny's narrative handler—Johnny's final gesture could be interpreted as one of dependance on and subservience to his friend and critic. Yet, the rhetorical structure of the passage most clearly determines the tone of the scene. The future tense dominates the passage: every conjugated verb, with the exception of 'está llorando,' expresses possible courses of action. As used here, the meaning of this verbal form is ambiguous and avoids easy interpretation: Bruno could be supposing, in all realism, what would happen *if* the scenario came to pass; or, the future tense might heighten the 'active momentaneity' of the event as it happens, as though its occurrence were so unfathomable that it eluded temporal placement. Either way, Bruno goes on to relate his own response:

“*Mi reacción es tan natural, he querido levantar a Johnny, evitar que hiciera el ridículo, y al final el ridículo lo he hecho yo porque nada hay más lamentable que un hombre esforzándose por mover a otro que está muy bien como está [...]*” (187).

Two shifts in verb tense ensue, from the narration of Johnny's actions to those of Bruno. Unpredictable and unknowable, Johnny moves first in the future tense; Bruno, in the simple present and present perfect. In the abrupt change of verb tenses that he commands, the weight of imminence and importance shifts to Bruno, who protagonizes himself as narrator while simultaneously manipulating Johnny's expressionistic latitude. The temporal schism of Bruno's self-aware story-telling places Johnny within the confines of Bruno's narrative power, ensnaring the musician in the most explicitly constructed chronology of *El perseguidor*, as denoted by strategic shifts in verb tense. In this way, the sheer constructed nature of the story becomes apparent.

In conjunction with the chronologies woven by and around Johnny, there is also the matter of his diagetic 'textualization,' that multifarious process by which Johnny is dissembled and eventually incorporated into a number of sub-texts and sub-narratives which stretch out from the complete text of *El perseguidor*. As already mentioned, the most prominent is Bruno's music biography, which halts and defines Johnny at the height of his musical career, but omits the most compromising circumstances of his life—namely, his physical decline and obsession with time. However, after his death, Johnny re-surfaces in another text, a letter sent to Bruno by a Paris acquaintance, Baby Lennox. Of the correspondence he received following Johnny's death, Bruno says,

“Primero llegaron los telegramas [...] veinte días después tuve carta de Baby Lennox, que no se había olvidado de mí [...] ‘Lo único que me consuela’ -agregaba deliciosa-

mente Baby- ‘es que murió contento y sin saberlo. Estaba mirando la televisión y de golpe se cayó al suelo’” (203).

Baby’s letter depicts the ignoble manner of Johnny’s death, and postulates an ironic counter-narrative that opposes the biography that Bruno has been promoting all along. Baby continues, “‘Antes de que se me olvide, un día en Bellevue preguntó mucho por ti [...] *hablaba siempre de unos campos llenos de cosas, y después te llamaba y hasta te decía palabrotas, pobre*’” (204). The statuesque figure that Bruno wishes to show the world in his professional text—a highly glossed portrait of the jazzman and his influences—is degraded by Baby’s private narrative. Her account colors the two elements of Johnny’s life that Bruno elects to repress—Johnny’s mean decline, exacerbated by his errant drug use, and his pathological obsession with time. As illustrated by the letter, Johnny returns to these themes shortly before his death, babbling about, in Baby’s paraphrase, “campos llenos de cosas.” Even though the narrative advanced by the letter conflicts with Bruno’s biography, or rather, with what Bruno tells of his biography, Baby’s text fits within the broader scheme of the ‘senses of time’ operating in the text. The death episodes she describes caps the chronology of Johnny’s life, compartmentalizing his end by dividing it into a sequence of unglamorous recitations. Therein, his maniacal behaviour and irrational utterances feed into the fatalistic temporality that has haunted him all the while.

The process of Johnny’s diagetive textualization also proceeds at the margins of *El perseguidor*, where a meta-narrative arises and encompasses the many chronologies of the text while warping its scope in a surprising way. The occasional mention of the narrator’s nameless wife—perhaps the most cursory figure to pass through the story—bears heavily on the reader’s understanding of time and its narrativistic treatment. The wife appears in rare circumstances, such as lapses in the flow of Bruno’s association with Johnny, or moments in which Bruno’s attention returns to his private affairs and away from those of his friend and biographic subject. Firstly, Bruno talks with Johnny’s bandmate Art Boucaya at the marquess’ house to hear about an earlier recording session that he missed. He says, “Y entonces Art Boucaya ha aprovechado para darme detalles de la sesión de ayer, *que me he perdido por culpa de mi mujer con neumonía*” (160, italics added). Secondly, the morning after the recording of *Amorous*, Bruno learns of Johnny’s subsequent mental breakdown, in which he set fire to the hotel mattress and ran nude through the lobby. He writes, “Y a la mañana siguiente me he encontrado a Johnny en las noticias de la policía del Figaro [...] *Le he mostrado a mi mujer para alentarla en su convalecencia*” (170, italics added). The abridged illness and recovery of Bruno’s wife gradually weaves into the complete narrative a chronology altogether separate from those thus far mentioned. This novel chronology finds closure in the last line of the text. Upon finishing his biography by amending it with a note of Johnny’s death, Bruno reports on the aftermath and the fate of his book: “Quizá no esté bien que yo diga esto, pero como es natural me sitúo en un plano meramente estético. Ya hablan de una nueva traducción, creo que al sueco o al noruego. *Mi mujer está encantada con la noticia*” (205, italics added). As a sub-textual phenomenon, the wife’s inclusion collapses the narrative-time of *El perseguidor* into a chronicle outside of the proper text. In the first example above, this interstitial ‘sense of time’ separates Bruno from his biographic subject, and then reduces the same in the following two examples to a mere composite of his madness and com-

mercial value. Consequently, this recapitulation of the narrative course implies that outside of the story of *El perseguidor*—as the events happen, and as direct discourse, action, and narrative commentary are related—there is a severely foreshortened, extradiagetic representation of the text’s full content.

In this way, another ‘sense of time’ is cast upon the many overlaying chronologies of *El Perseguidor*, one that emerges from beneath the known chronologies to upset the balance. In effect, whenever Bruno’s wife is mentioned, a reductive reckoning of narrative time is made: Johnny’s pathology and its imagery becomes a stupid act of arson; Bruno ‘narrates’ that pathology with the depthless police beat, exhibiting the nuanced emotional disdain he feels towards Johnny; and the manipulation of the narrative factors of grammatical time, scene duration, and the tropic biography become an unadorned statement of fact—the biography is popular, and this makes Bruno’s wife happy. As the overarching narrative of *El perseguidor* diminishes, a collection of meta-narratives takes its place. The many interpretations of Bruno’s story about his relationship to and perceptions of Johnny depend absolutely on his explicit narrative control over time *and* the subtextual offshoots. In the hypothetical mediation of time posed by the persistent sub-narrative of Bruno’s wife, the text’s full content is drastically modified. The most complex thematic aspects on which one might base analytical claims are nearly eliminated, leaving only the skeleton of a story. This anomaly allows the reader to re-think the role of time and his or her perceptions of the characters as beings who do not act within narrative temporality, but are acted upon by it.

In some instances, the narrativistic treatment of time fits the thematic within its rigid chronologies. At others, the narrativistic and thematic treatments merge together, uniting their ‘senses of time’ in a blend of metaphors, grammatical devices, and narrative devices. Myriad chronologies pervade the text, some subdued, others open, redacting the narrative course and the concept which lies at the story’s heart. Through the conceit of temporality, *El perseguidor* transforms itself into a fickle structure on top of which the story of the characters’ multi-faceted relationship rests. But, such claims cannot go without challenge, for the overt use of time as a narrative trope puts in doubt the reliability of Bruno as a narrator, since the text is his subject to his memory, his insecurities, and his own story-telling agenda.

Bibliography

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