

immediately into giddy, irreverent joking. What is most distinctive about the world he creates is the extraordinary oscillation of emotions—from love, to hate, to violence, to tenderness, all within a few paragraphs. This flow in the narrative rhythm uses the fast cutting technique of film, the fade in and out, the flashback, so that we absorb the complex strains of this style of life without any need to separate and analyze them. There are times when the switching on and off of the various streams of consciousness of the characters makes one feel that James Joyce has a lot to answer for. Yet if much of it fails to illuminate our deeper understanding of the characters it does transmit the real kaleidoscopic unpredictability of life—the drift from joke to violence, to religious probing, to the need for a beer, in rapid succession.

As in the writing of Sygne the attempt to capture the poetic stream of the dialect occasionally becomes strained. The language tends to get displayed and overworked at times. The self-consciousness of sentences such as “That day seemed to drag along like a soaking wet towel pulled from a bucket of water” (p. 8) jars us periodically. There are times when the narrative line sags when Pinsent seems to indulge his love for colorful scenes without advancing his central concern.

In spite of all its considerable riches the book seems to me to have certain fundamental limitations. The story seems initially to promise more than it delivers. It penetrates the central characters John and the Missus, Matt, the son, and his wife, Faith, to a certain level and then goes no further. Despite the fact that we are inside the characters' heads for a considerable part of the novel the major relationships never come into clear focus. John Munn, realizing that he cannot hold out against the disintegrating forces desecrates his life, his friends, roots up his house, and eventually destroys himself. It seems for a while as if we are dealing with a tragedy of considerable proportions, but in the end the story seems to settle for something on a smaller scale. As so often in modern literature we seem to be driving towards tragic grandeur and end up mired in pathos. Perhaps Pinsent is simply being true to his culture—in this world everything gets cut down to size. John Munn stumbles drunkenly to his death and another community fades away. The ending is low-keyed—people look forward to another wake, there is a wry refusal to magnify the sense of loss. Pinsent has demonstrated brilliantly that what is disappearing is not all foolishness, but he would not, I suppose, be a true Newfoundlander if he didn't give a philosophical shrug and wonder whether there was enough home brew laid in for the wake.

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Cortázar's *Ultimo Round*: A Bi-Level Literary-Pictorial Experience

Julio Cortázar's *Ultimo round*, which first appeared in 1969, is a good example of audience-participation art. In *Rayuela* he had already suggested that the reader choose his own order for approaching the chapters, but *Ultimo round* represents a further step, in that it is now *impossible* for the reader to proceed in a conventional manner. Upon opening the book the reader notes that there are two sets of pages within the binding, and he must immediately decide which of

them to read first, and even whether he will go through by reading the top and then the bottom of page one, and so on. In addition, only a few pages—at the beginning and the center particularly—obviously belong together. One example is p. 9, the whole being a picture of Cortázar himself. The top section is already distorted and fragmented by the cutting out and rotation of concentric circles on his face, but if the reader insists on turning the two pages separately he must bear the responsibility for further fragmentation of the author. Any other combinations are purely subjective on the part of the reader: the author wants his reader to feel free to find some personal meaning in a chance combination, whether of two pages whose numbers correspond or in the combination of any other pair of pages. So *Ultimo round* cannot be termed a wholly finished work of art. No work of art is finished until there are “good vibes” between the chaos in the text and the chaos within the reader.

However, Cortázar questions the notion of the preestablished sort of coherence: he remarks, “La coherencia es algo que siempre alegra vaya a saber por qué” (“Coherence is always something delightful—who knows why”).¹

In a sense it is as if Cortázar were reacting to Marshall McLuhan’s prediction of the demise of the printed word on the basis of its being a hot medium and hopelessly linear. Meeting the charge that a book is necessarily linear, this work not only refuses to present its divisions in any logical, set order but employs only sentence fragments at many points. And whereas McLuhan points out that television is a cool medium in part because the viewer’s mind is forced to participate by piecing the dots together into a picture, Cortázar makes his books a cool medium by asking the reader to assemble the fragments into an experience meaningful to him personally. This is what he terms “la alquimia de lo aleatorio” (“the alchemy of the aleatory”) (p. 123).

It becomes evident too that in this work the medium is the message. Even if it were possible to arrange the contents of *Ultimo round* logically in a conventional manner, it would lose the major portion of its impact, simply because the greatest effect of the work lies in its very arrangement rather than in its content. Of what he calls his “poesía permutante” (“convertible poetry”), Cortázar says, “He ahí, una vez mas, la colaboración que le pido [al lector] en cualquier cosa que hago” (“Observe once more the collaboration which I ask [of the reader] in anything I do”) (p. 69). The “poesía permutante” is a series of poems scattered throughout the first floor, each of them simply a number of lines which can be read beginning anywhere, naturally with a different effect each time. This is nothing new in itself, but Cortázar does seem to be suggesting something which to my knowledge is an innovation: each page containing a number of lines of poetry is bordered by a dotted line, in a subtle hint that one is free to cut out the pages and play at rearranging them.

There are also “Los discursos del pinchajeta” (“The Can Opener Discourses”) (pp. 88-92), in which the narrator describes his changing relationships with his can opener and other normally inanimate objects of the household. The drawings are surrealistic and depict a man apparently drowning or sinking in quicksand. His ten fingers are all arrows pointed upward, indicating perhaps that his very body has become the message, his pathetic plea to be lifted out of whatever it is he is sinking in.

Cortázar appears to conceive of *Ultimo round* as the daily newspaper chronicling the apocalypse, referring to it in the text as a “diario.” The format of the cover is that of a newspaper, and this is supported, in some editions, by a light yellow color. The content is like that of a newspaper in that it is miscellaneous and reflects the human condition in transit: there is something for everyone, including ads for a doll repair service, bicycles, and battery recharging.

The book is apocalyptic in its very title, which alludes to a boxing match near its conclusion, and does so in a fragmented language in which one word is properly Spanish and the other an English loan word. Its significance is expanded in a story entitled "Descripción de un combate" ("Description of a Prize Fight"), which is the first item inside the book after the one-page "Sílabas vivas" ("Living Syllable"). Here the text is on the second floor while photographs occupy the first. It is written for the most part in good detached journalistic style, and could be a typical newspaper account of an actual boxing match were it not for the fact that only one boxer is mentioned, and the pictures show only the one as well. At the end there appears a laconic mention of the money taken in on the occasion of the destruction of this former hero. The total effect is that of a parable of modern man being battered and at the same time exploited by the unseen forces which control his life. The subtitle of the story is "A buen entendedor" ("To the Person of True Understanding"), so that the author, like Jesus Christ, is calling for a careful consideration by the "elect" of the meaning of his parables.

Apocalypse is not simply cataclysm. It is a destruction of all that is in order to rebuild from the most basic beginnings. Therefore if a book is truly apocalyptic it should reflect some attempt at putting the pieces back together in a meaningful order (although not necessarily guided by previously existing canons of "coherence"). The first step should be some sort of return to origins, but in effect Cortázar declares, "De ninguna manera me creo un ejemplo de esa 'vuelta a los orígenes'" ("By no means do I consider myself a participant in that 'return to origins'") (p. 205). On the basis of the rest of the book, however, I have to conclude that what he has reference to is limited to the search for—as he calls it—the telluric national past, because at another point he states, with apparent approval, "Los personajes de una novela de James Ballard, favorecidos por un mundo en resuelta entropía, tienden a organizar sus sueños en procura de una verdad primordial" ("The characters in a James Ballard novel, favored by a world in determined entropy, tend to organize their dreams in an endeavor to recover a primordial truth") (p. 48).

So man must pick up the pieces of what has disintegrated in his Self and his environment, just as he picks up the pieces which make up this piece of literature, and build a new world for himself out of them. In the case of the exploitation of Latin America, for example, "de tanto arroz bañado en sangre / nacera otra manera de ser hombre" ("out of so much blood-soaked rice / will be born a new manner of being a man") (p. 77).

The new reality emerging out of the chaos of the apocalypse involves a nonrational way of knowing, a truth which refuses to be captured in the nets carefully passed down from Socrates to the twentieth century. It is a nonlinear truth, not based on the syllogism or symbolic logic, so it is most appropriately contained in a book of random order. It is, as Carlos Castaneda would have it, a separate reality,² and all those who may rail against it as illogical are ignored, because not only do they not have currently meaningful answers, they don't even know how to formulate the right questions. The break is viewed as being so radical that even the numerical system which underlies symbolic logic has broken down. One of the graffiti taken by Cortázar from the walls of Paris during the rioting there purports to come from the "Facultad de Letras" and says, "Estamos tranquilos: 2 más 2 ya no son 4" ("We are calm: 2 and 2 no longer equal 4") (p. 59).

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