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Jaime Alazraki. *Hacia Cortázar: Aproximaciones a su obra*. Barcelona: Editorial Anthropos, 1994, 382 pp.

Readers of Latin American literature—especially readers of Cortázar and Borges—owe Jaime Alazraki a great debt. Professor Alazraki has, over his long and distinguished career, concentrated on these two figures, but his work defies the narrow specialization that such concentration might imply. The essays in Alazraki's *Borges and the Kabbalah* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) manage to overarch Borges' entire literary production by tracing certain recurring themes back to Kabbalistic sources. The themes that we have come to think of as quintessentially «Borgesian» long precede Borges, of course, as Alazraki's elegant essays attest. In mining this intricate vein of Borges' labyrinth, Alazraki achieves a panoramic perspective; in his minute attention to vast ideas, he reflects the author who is his subject.

This paradox subtends the essays in *Hacia Cortázar*, as well. Alazraki's synthesizing intelligence is fully operative here, too, and again his broad perspective proceeds from his close focus. *Hacia Cortázar* is comprised of eighteen essays written over a span of twenty years between 1972 and 1992, and it now sits beside *Borges and the Kabbalah* on my library shelf, a companion volume, and also a counterpart. For Alazraki is well aware of the gulf that separates these two writers' world views, and he repeatedly contrasts their different literary strategies. Indeed, he frames the whole collection with this contrasting pair.

On the first page of his preface to *Hacia Cortázar*, Alazraki writes:

En algún lugar he definido las ficciones de Borges como reelaboraciones de argumentos filosóficos, teológicos o literarios; textos que comentan otros textos, literatura de la literatura. Los relatos de Cortá-

zar, en cambio, captan experiencias inéditas que desbordan el ámbito de la Biblioteca y corretean por la vida. (7)

Alazraki's comparative speculations move along this virtual spectrum between Library and Life, most especially in two essays entitled «Dos soluciones al tema del compadre en Borges y Cortázar» and «Tres formas del ensayo contemporáneo: Borges, Paz, Cortázar.» In his final essay, «La postmodernidad de Julio Cortázar,» Alazraki again situates Cortázar with respect to Borges—this time on the opposite side of another virtual line—that separating modernism from postmodernism.

These conceptual demarcations are useful in foregrounding Cortázar's particular genius, which lay in his integral engagement of both Library and Life. Alazraki weighs this balance further in terms of imagination and history. Tracing the course of Cortázar's career, in what is for me the most telling of the essays included in this collection («Imaginación e historia en Julio Cortázar»), he argues that it is Cortázar's relation to history that compels the author's entire corpus:

Mi tesis es la siguiente: si su obra literaria, desde los Reyes hasta Rayuela, le va abriendo ese camino hacia una toma de conciencia histórica, esa toma de conciencia y su participación política posterior marcará también su obra literaria. Creo que si la profundidad humana de su obra hasta Rayuela lo pone frente al drama político de Latinoamérica, su participación en ese drama profundizará también el costado humano de su obra posterior. (307)

Despite Cortázar's self-avowed shift to a more politically committed literature after *Rayuela*, Alazraki affirms its presence in his earliest writings as well.

Cortázar's first published text is on Rimbaud. While this early interest in the French Symbolists might seem to signal the opposite of political engagement, Alazraki argues not. Indeed, Cortázar's essay, published pseudonymously in 1941, draws the same distinction between Rimbaud and Mallarmé that Alazraki draws between Borges and Cortázar. Cortázar writes:

Mallarmé concentra su ser en el logro de la Poesía con el anhelo catártico de ver surgir, alguna vez, la pura flor del poema . . . [en cambio, para Rimbaud] no fue un problema poético, sino el de una ambiciosa realización humana, para la cual el Poema, la Obra, debían constituir las llaves. Eso lo acerca más que todo a los que vemos a la Poesía como un desatarse total del ser, como su presentación absoluta, su entelequia. (Cited by Alazraki, 22)

The young Cortázar, disguised temporarily as Julio Denis, contrasts the French poets in terms of their relation to the poles of the same virtual spectrum that Alazraki traces between Borges and Cortázar, between Library and Life.

Mallarmé is to Rimbaud, then, as Borges is to Cortázar. But to propose such an equation is to oversimplify, and neither Alazraki nor Cortázar would accept it without qualification. Cortázar's commitment to history (Life) is always conditioned by his parallel commitment to imagined forms of being (Library); he knows that history requires the writer to imagine its many forms. So Alazraki says of Cortázar's work, and of literature generally: «Compromiso, entonces, no con una sola dimensión— aunque se trate de la dimensión sociohistórica— sino con todas; la literatura como la búsqueda de una realidad multiforme que incorpore la historia, sí, pero también el sueño, lo conocido y lo que aún desconocemos, lo que vemos todos los días y lo invisible» (328).

It is Alazraki's complex understanding of Cortázar's artistic commitment that makes his essay on the author's final collection of stories so satisfying. *Deshoras* was published in 1983, a year before Cortázar's death in 1984; Alazraki's essay was published in 1985. This tight proximity of ends and endings is reflected in the apocalyptic tenor of the stories in *Deshoras*, and in Alazraki's discussion of them. «Fin de etapa,» «Escuela de noche,» «Satarsa,» «Pesadillas,» and the rest of the collection evoke the horrors of the military dictators in Argentina and the dirty war that they were waging.

Alazraki begins by situating *Deshoras* in relation to Cortázar's first collections, *Bestiario* and *Final del juego*. If the source of the fantastic («la segunda realidad») that invades *Bestiario* is Cortázar's surrealist manipulation of images, and its source in *Final del juego* is his surrealist juxtaposition of narrative perspectives, in *Deshoras* the fantastic proceeds from the realistic narration itself. Alazraki summarizes Cortázar's trajectory:

El tigre o los conejos de Bestiario y la inversión motociclista/moteca o narrador/axolotl de Final del juego han sido reemplazados en Deshoras (y ya en colecciones anteriores a esta última) por la visión directa del narrador, que sin salirse de esa óptica que todos reconocemos como la nuestra de todos los días nos deja, sin embargo, frente a un silencio insólito que no es un hecho extraño o un quiasmo inquietante. (152)

The political realities described by the several narrators of *Deshoras* are fantastic enough: there is no need for surrealist tricks.

Alazraki cannot discuss one of Cortázar's works without contemplating its place in the entire Cortazarian cannon, and it is this characteristic that gives to Alazraki's essays their panoramic perspective. In his discussion of *Deshoras*, as I have just shown, he traces the «rebelión de lo irracional» from Cortázar's youth

to his maturity; in other essays, he overarches the evolution of other themes and narrative strategies. This organic approach to Cortázar's work not only demonstrates the author's changing attitudes over time but also confirms his extraordinary capacity for formal experimentation to accommodate those changes. Alazraki reminds us in a dozen different ways of Cortázar's technical virtuosity, and he prepares us (if we weren't already) for Cortázar's own statement, made in 1982: « . . . considerando el total de los cuentos que he escrito, que son muchos, más de setenta, bueno, yo estoy seguro de que, en conjunto, cuantitativamente, he escrito los mejores cuentos que jamás se han escrito en lengua española » (321). Cortázar looks back over his career and sees it whole. So, too, Alazraki, who surveys Cortázar's evolution from a comprehensive perspective and can thus take full measure of his achievement. Because this collection encompasses not only Cortázar's entire career but much of Alazraki's as well, we sense his synthesizing energy the more acutely.

These essays were published over the course of more than two decades, so they inevitably contain some repetition. In *Hacia Cortázar*, this is not a weakness but a strength. The reader is asked to consider basic issues in many different contexts, and is encouraged to compare, contrast, and accumulate insights into those issues. Meanings accrue.

Among these meanings are Cortázar's relation to surrealism and existentialism, his sources and influences, his metaphoric procedures, the relation of his politics and poetics, his conception of his own literary style. Take this last instance. In his 1984 Berkeley lectures, Cortázar likened his style to music, speaking of its rhythm, cadence and structure. Without imitating music, he aimed for what he called «una prosa encantatoria»—a neologism combining *encanto* and *canto* (329-30). In another essay, Alazraki cites another comment, made by Cortázar in 1978, again about his own style. This time he refers not to music but to his «visual rhythms»: «La gran maravilla de los ritmos de Paul Klee, de ciertos ritmos de Picasso o de Matisse influyeron en mi manera de escribir . . . » (158) Alazraki uses each of Cortázar's comments in the context of his own analysis; together they resonate to create a critical rhythm of their own.

Another resonating set of references is to Neruda. I had not systematically compared Cortázar to Neruda, nor does Alazraki, but he does link the two writers often enough to encourage the reader to do so as well. The similarities of their political commitments are obvious enough, of course, but Alazraki points to other conjunctions as well. Most revealing is his comparison of their shared tendency to privilege the creative process over its products, and their related tendency to make that process their subject. Alazraki cites Amado Alonso (1966, 43-44) on Neruda's poetry: «Neruda pone más placer en el poetizar que en el poema, más en el hacer que en no, sino que hace de él poesía No anula el camino, sino

que hace de él poesía.» Alazraki then draws his comparison: «La advertencia es aplicable al cuento de Cortázar: ese tono reticente, de relato en gestación . . . es la forma que más le conviene, es su estrategia más eficaz» (167). Without Alazraki's repeated recourse to Neruda throughout the volume, this particular comparison would be no more than a passing remark. However, given the echoes among the essays, it becomes an illuminating comment that compels further consideration.

One of the indispensable conventions of the sub-genre called «book review» is a penultimate paragraph or two in which the reviewer expresses his or her reservations about the book. I will observe this convention, and say that I miss a subject index. This may seem ungrateful since the reader is already the beneficiary of two indices, one to proper names the other to Cortázar's works. Still, precisely because of the interweaving of themes and references that I have just praised, a subject index with conceptual categories would have codified the panoramic picture that the essays collectively impart.

I might also quibble with Alazraki's essay on Cortázar and postmodernism, in which Alazraki appears to accept untenable distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, especially between the supposed ahistoricism of modernism and the supposed political engagement of postmodernism. Alazraki offers his own series of such dichotomies and (not surprisingly) locates Cortázar on the side of postmodernism. In the process, Cortázar's work becomes secondary to Alazraki's critical categories. This is unfortunate, because these categories are unnecessary to discuss the work. Just *how* unnecessary is clear from Alazraki's other essays, where he situates Cortázar in various philosophical and literary traditions without recourse to any postmodernist theory whatsoever. I appreciate Alazraki's observation in his last paragraph that Cortázar never used the word «postmodernity.» That's my point, too. It wasn't necessary, and it still isn't. Nor will it be until postmodernist theorists develop cultural categories that can be applied specifically to the different nature and forms and imperatives of Latin American literature.

To summarize: Every reader of *Hacia Cortázar* will find a great deal to appreciate, and also issues with which to take exception. Whatever one's particular preferences among the essays, I have confirmed for myself what I had already long suspected. Jaime Alazraki is Cortázar's foremost critic, and he is likely to remain so for many years to come. I am tempted to say that Julio Cortázar is lucky, but what do I know about luck, and furthermore, why shouldn't this author have the brilliant critic his work deserves? So I'll stop by saying that I can see Cortázar smiling. To have such a reader as Alazraki would make any author smile.

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Works Cited

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