

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

Julio Cortázar is considered one of the major experimentalist writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Complex and eclectic, his works reflect the influence of French surrealism, psychoanalysis, and his love for both photography and jazz, as well as a strong commitment to revolutionary Latin American politics. While an acknowledged master of short fiction, and one of the central authors of the Latin American literary 'boom' of the 60's, Cortázar is not as widely-known a short story writer in the Anglo-American culture as Jorge Luis Borges or Gabriel García Márquez, for example. Is this simply related to Cortázar's own eclecticism and positioning with respect to the literary canons, or can it be attributed to flaws and inadequacies in some of the published versions in English, and the strategies used by his translators?

Specifically, my interest was awakened by my disappointment with the published English version of the short story 'Pesadillas', translated by Alberto Manguel (1998). 'Pesadillas' is one of the last short stories Cortázar wrote, and what makes it so special is the fact that here he finally manages to combine short fiction and politics, and achieve a publicly acclaimed result that was also personally satisfying to him<sup>1</sup>. However, I found an

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<sup>1</sup> 'Then, starting with the subject matter, for me, a short story like "Pesadillas" matters a lot because it's full of meaning, because I see it as a sort of allegorical summary, if you like, of the situation Argentina has lived through over the last few years.' My translation. (Readers of Spanish will have access to the full polysemous dimension to the verb *contar*, which can mean 'to say/tell', 'to mean', and/or 'to matter'. It is virtually impossible to maintain both, content and form – as well as the informality and spontaneity of spoken language – in English. This is a good example of Cortázar's complex use of language:) "Entonces,

unpublished, independent translation of the same story by Anne McLean (1997), in which I felt Cortázar and his writing were much more recognisable.

Accordingly, I propose to examine the underlying reasons for this subjective response by analysing the translation strategies followed by each translator, with a view to determining how accurately and adequately each manages to bring Cortázar to English-speaking readers. This contrastive analysis will be divided into the following areas: tone and register; accuracy and naturalness; omissions and additions; punctuation; choice; structure and distribution of information; grammar. The final degree of success will be assessed from an overall pragmatic standpoint.

It is my hope that this analysis will permit the elaboration of a translation rationale for Cortázar that gives English readers an experience closely approximate to the writer's unique style.

## **1.2 Julio Cortázar – Biographical Details**

A brief biographical sketch is provided here in order to assist in situating Cortázar's work in the context. Particular aspects of his work and style will be discussed in more detail in the literature review.

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empezando por la temática, un cuento como 'Pesadillas' para mí cuenta mucho porque significa mucho, porque me parece una especie de resumen alegórico, si usted quiere, de la situación que se ha vivido en la Argentina en los últimos años." (Perlado, 1983).

Julio Cortázar (1914-1984). Born in Brussels, Belgium, to Argentine parents, his family returned to Argentina when he was four. There he studied to be a teacher at the Escuela Normal de Profesores Mariano Acosta, and then continued his studies at the University of Buenos Aires. In 1944 he moved to Mendoza, where he taught French literature at the University of Cuyo. In 1948 he graduated as a Public Translator in English and in French, taking just 9 months to complete a three-year curriculum. His intellectual intensity found a natural outlet in writing and his first book of short stories, *Bestiary*, was published in 1951. That same year he received a grant from the French government, and moved to Paris where he lived until his death on 12 February 1984.

Of particular interest to us is the fact that, besides being a writer, Cortázar worked as a translator himself, in Buenos Aires and also in Europe for UNESCO. His translations include titles by G. K. Chesterton, Daniel Defoe, Louisa May Alcott, André Gide, Jean Giono, Marguerite Yourcenar, Lord Houghton's *Life and Letters of John Keats*, and the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe (Stavans 1996: 292-98). Not surprisingly, we find translators as characters and/or narrators in many of his stories.

From a translator's perspective, these facts make Cortázar a stimulating and challenging author to both translate and analyse.

## **2. Literature Review**

This review is divided into two sections: a summary of the main identifying features of Cortázar's themes and short story writing, including the writer's own views on his prose style, and a summary of what has been said regarding translating him into English.

### **2.1 Cortázar's short fiction**

Some detailed knowledge of the principal characteristics of Cortázar and his prose style is necessary here if we are to gauge how well his translators have fared.

There is a good range of preceptive commentary on Cortázar's short story writing available in Spanish, but it is beyond the scope of this research to include such vast literature. There is much less commentary in English, yet this is perhaps to be expected since, as McLean (1998) has observed, less than half of his books have been translated into English, and these translations have been the work of more than a dozen different authors.

Cortázar's short fiction is characterised by one easily identifiable pattern: fantasy creeping into reality, or put in another way, fantasy filtering through the gaps of reality. The reader is presented with a banal, everyday life situation, and then, little by little, the fantastic elements begin to take over. Cortázar unfolds his mystery by depicting a seemingly safe atmosphere with ordinary characters, often in a family context. What makes his stories all the more fantastic is his masterful portrayal of the very concrete details of everyday life,

making the passage to the 'other side' even more sinister. But the bridge between fantasy and reality is narrower in some of his stories, especially his later ones.

In my previous short stories ... the fantastic *was* actually fantastic, and sometimes verged on the supernatural. Now my idea of the fantastic is closer to what we call reality. Maybe because reality is increasingly closer to the fantastic. (...) my endeavours in relation to certain Latin American regimes over the last few years have so absorbed me that I have used fantasy to treat this subject in some stories ... in a way that is, in my view, very close to reality. (...) thirty years ago I'd write things that came into my mind and would only judge them from an aesthetic point of view, mainly because I'm a writer... Now I'm a tormented writer, very worried by the situation in Latin America; and as a result, consciously or unconsciously, that concern filters through into my writing.<sup>2</sup> (Talking about *Deshoras* in interview with Jason Weiss. My translation.)

In an interview with *Página 12's* Angel Berlanga (2004), Mario Goloboff, writer and professor of Argentinian Literature at the National University of La Plata, states that many of Cortázar's last short stories published while he was alive are excellent, and he highlights Cortázar's leanings towards the fantastic as a distinguishing feature: 'Cortázar is the only author within the fantasy genre who, without giving it up, embraces the political, social, and historical context – not Borges, not Bioy Casares, not Lugones, nor Horacio Quiroga includes that level of real reference to everyday life and politics'. Goloboff emphasises that

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<sup>2</sup> "En mis cuentos anteriores... lo fantástico *era* verdaderamente fantástico, y a veces rozaba lo sobrenatural. (...) Ahora, mi idea de lo fantástico está más próxima a lo que llamamos la realidad. Tal vez porque la realidad se acerca cada vez más a lo fantástico. (...) en estos últimos años, mis esfuerzos con respecto a ciertos regímenes latinoamericanos... me han absorbido a tal punto que he usado lo fantástico en ciertos relatos para tratar ese tema... de una manera que, en mi opinión, está muy próxima a la realidad. (...) hace treinta años escribía cosas que me venían a la cabeza, y sólo las juzgaba con un criterio estético, en primer lugar porque soy un escritor... ahora soy un escritor atormentado, muy preocupado por la situación de Latinoamérica, y en consecuencia esa preocupación se filtra en mi escritura, de manera consciente o inconsciente". (Weiss, 1983).

the fantastic in everyday life comes up in Cortázar's explanations of the short story, 'He said that we go about in the real world with a rationalist view, and that that prevents us from seeing the strange phenomena in the gaps of reality...' <sup>3</sup> (p. 5).

Some of the most important elements that define Cortázar's style are his mastery in reproducing colloquial speech, and the euphony and polyphony of voices in his writing. Other specific characteristics of his style found in 'Pesadillas' are register and deictic shifts, at times combined with a stream of consciousness style. It should be emphasised here that the use of rhythm and sound are vital features of his writing, as he himself has stated:

To me, writing is a musical operation (...) it's the notion of rhythm, of euphony (...) the euphony that results from a syntactic drawing – we're talking language now – that having removed all the unnecessary bits, all the superfluous bits, shows pure melody. (...) What I would consider my writing style is the removal of all possibility for variations. In other words, the melody is expressed in all its purity (...) otherwise it will be lost in a labyrinth from which the imaginative reader will get some result, no doubt. But that's not what I would like'. <sup>4</sup> (Cortázar & Prego 1997: 98-99. My translation.)

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<sup>3</sup> "Cortázar es el único autor de género fantástico que, sin renunciar a él, incorpora el contexto político, social e histórico: ni Borges, ni Bioy Casares, ni Lugones, ni Horacio Quiroga incorporan el grado de referencia real a la vida y la política cotidianas". Lo fantástico en lo cotidiano, subraya Goloboff, aparece en las explicaciones de Cortázar sobre el cuento: "El decía que nos movemos en el mundo real con una mirada racionalista y que eso no nos permite ver los fenómenos extraños en los intersticios de la realidad..." (Berlanga 2004: 5).

<sup>4</sup> "Para mí, la escritura es una operación musical (...) es la noción de ritmo, de la eufonía (...) que sale de un dibujo sintáctico (ahora hablamos del idioma) que al haber eliminado todo lo innecesario, todo lo superfluo, muestra la pura melodía. (...) Lo que yo podría considerar como mi estilo al escribir es la eliminación de toda posibilidad de hacer variaciones. Es decir, que la melodía se da en toda su pureza (...) si no, se pierde en un dédalo del que el lector imaginativo obtendrá algún resultado, claro. Pero no es lo que yo quisiera." (Cortázar & Prego 1997: 98-99).