



A JOURNAL OF
CULTURAL AND
LITERARY CRITICISM

Toward a non-appropriative rhetoric: Julio Cortázar's reading of John Keats

Author: Diego Alegría

Source: English Studies in Latin America, No. 25 (July 2023)

ISSN 0719-9139

Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





TOWARD A NON-APPROPRIATIVE RHETORIC: JULIO CORTÁZAR'S READING OF JOHN KEATS

DIEGO ALEGRÍA¹

¹ Diego Alegría (Santiago, Chile, 1994) Poet and essayist. He holds a BA in English Linguistics and Literature and an MA in Literature from the University of Chile. He is currently a Doctoral Candidate in English (Literary Studies) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His scholarly work is situated at the intersection of syntactic figures, linguistic standardization, and literary autonomy in the long-nineteenth century, particularly the poetry of British Romanticism and Spanish American *Modernismo*. He is the author of the poetry book *Raíz abierta* (2015), the bilingual chapbook *y sin embargo los umbrales / and yet the thresholds* (2019), and the essay collection *Poética del Caminar: Poems (1817) de John Keats*. He has won national and international poetry and essay awards, such as "Juegos Literarios Gabriela Mistral Municipal" Prize (Chile, 2012), Finalist of the "José María Valverde" Prize (Spain, 2014), and Poetry Fellow of the Pablo Neruda Foundation (Chile, 2017), and the Lore Metzger Prize in Romantic Studies (EE.UU., UK; 2020) and Chair's Ph.D. Essay Prize from the UW-Madison English Department (EE.UU., 2021), respectively.

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats (1795-1821), the lyric object, a “silent form” (44), does not *speak* until the textual reproduction of its famous oracle: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—, that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50). Throughout its apostrophic invocation, the poem highlights the model’s ‘muteness’: “unravish’d bride of *quietness*”; “foster-child of *silence*” (1; 2) (my emphasis). Both the images of ‘muteness’ and the figure of the apostrophe sustain the ode’s generic features, particularly the hierarchy between the subject and the addressee, as well as the relationship between these sister arts: a ‘silent’ sculpture and a ‘speaking’ poem. Nevertheless, it seems as if the speaker would like to suspend this hierarchy and to invert these actions: the ode aims to create the necessary conditions for the urn’s capacity to speak (“to whom thou say’st”; 48). Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) offers a similar account of this desire in his book *Imagen de John Keats [Image of John Keats]*, written between 1951 and 1952, and published posthumously in 1996: although he pursues an integral reading of the poem’s ‘significance,’ the Argentinean writer concentrates on Keats’s ekphrastic contact with the urn. Furthermore, the style of his prose even translates the diction of the ode, as if the avant-garde author could *write* his own *reading*.

In this essay, I argue that Keats’s poem and Cortázar’s essay aspire to unsettle the hierarchies imposed by their generic conventions and rhetorical strategies by means of parataxis or coordination in opposition to hypotaxis or subordination. The significance of these compositional structures is the emergence of a non-appropriative rhetoric, a method coined and examined by the theorist Diane Davis in her book *Inessential Solidarity*. I understand that, in contrast with a hermeneutical rhetoric, a non-appropriative rhetoric is interested in how style not only interrupts semantic closure or interpretive appropriation, but also reveals how a primary source—the material urn; the textual ode—*moves*, affects, or persuades its

interlocutor. Thus, through an informed textual analysis, the essay will compare the first stanza of Keats's poem, especially the enumeration of rhetorical questions, with three passages from Cortázar's essay, relative to the ekphrastic contact and the scene of writing, in order to establish a scholarly conversation between literary studies and rhetorical theory around non-discursive features, particularly phonetic echoes—alliteration—, and syntactic patterns— anaphora and asyndeton—.

Keats's ode begins as follows:

I.

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (1-10)

In the ode's first stanza, the relative pronoun 'who' not only specifies, but also disfigures the addressee's multiple characterizations: "Sylvan historian, *who* canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:" (13-4); (my emphasis). However, the coordinating power of the asyndeton unsettles these hypotactic features between the first two verses and the next two lines. The semi-colon (4) marks how the poem changes its perspective from the second

person pronoun (“Thou”) to the third person pronoun (“leaf-fring’d legend”), while the absence of the addressee’s voice, invoked by the speaker, generates a series of questions around the urn’s significance, an object that “stays” as a “‘silent form’ to ‘tease us out of thought’” (Kelley 174). Despite their hermeneutic intention as semantic closure —i.e., their search for an integral meaning—, the questions constitute a non-appropriative operation, because they enact how the urn affects the speaker, an approach also shared by the scholar Susan Wolfson: “Keats writes the odes less as designs for certain interpretation than as calls for readerly participation” (90). In this light, parataxis shapes a horizontal relationship between the object and the subject by means of the concatenation of these questions, linked through the ellipsis of the verb ‘to be’: “What men or gods are these? What maidens *loth?* / What mad *pursuit?* What struggle to *escape?* / What pipes and *timbrels?* What wild *ecstasy?* (8-10); (my emphasis).

On the other hand, Cortázar’s reading focuses on the scene of writing and the place of imagination in the ode, a motif whose “critical attention,” along with *Imagen de John Keats*, “is long overdue, particularly from scholars of world literature,” a position sustained by Olivia Moy (“From Hampstead to Buenos Aires” 440). According to this critic, the Argentinean author performs two roles throughout his book: he is both a literary scholar and a creative writer, able to combine analytical methods of reading with “stream of consciousness style and a surrealist grammar of memory” (“From Hampstead to Buenos Aires” 445). Cortázar’s most representative passage on Keats’s ekphrastic experience around the Grecian urn begins as follows:

Imaginar una urna ideal, constituida por la unión de escenas y situaciones, conocidas acaso en grabados de vasos o comentarios poéticos; fruto de esos vagabundeos por las galerías del British Museum de donde Keats emergía deslumbrado y ansioso. Recuerdo de la contemplación de los frisos áticos, lecturas de Homero, descripciones helénicas de escudos y vasos. (258)

[Imagining an ideal urn, constituted by the union of scenes and situations, known perhaps in engravings of glasses or poetic comments; fruit of those wanderings through the galleries of the British Museum, from where Keats emerged dazzled and anxious. Memory of the contemplation of the Attic friezes, readings of Homer, Hellenic descriptions of shields and vessels.]¹

In this fragment, Cortázar relies on the clause rather than the sentence as a grammatical unit, because here we do not find a finite or conjugated verb that predicates, but an infinitive ('imaginar'; "imagining") and a noun ('recuerdo'; "memory"). This syntactic form generates temporal indeterminacy in terms of the actions displayed ('imagining'; 'remembering'): they describe the past through Keats's scene of writing and his intertextual references, but also show the immediacy or 'presentness' of the poem's reading, enacted by Cortázar's style. The composition of the passage is oriented toward parataxis or coordination in opposition to hypotaxis or subordination: in the text's first period, even though the urn's causes and features are arranged and hierarchized through two participles ('constituida' and 'conocidas'; "constituted" and "known") and a noun ('fruto'; "fruit"), the asyndeton is able to concatenate these sources and descriptions, generating this sense of 'immediacy.' The same stylistic phenomenon happens in the ode's first stanza with the metaphorical juxtaposition of a singular apostrophe (1-4) and the anaphoric succession of rhetorical questions (5-10).

This impression continues in the following passage:

Lo imagino a John acercándose a los mármoles, a los torsos rotos por el tiempo, a los perfiles límpidos, a las obsesionantes sonrisas de los rostros arcaicos. Su boca temblaría de contenido deseo. (259)

¹ The English translations of Julio Cortázar's passages throughout the essay are mine.

[I imagine John approaching the marbles, the torsos broken by time, the limpid profiles, the haunting smiles of archaic faces. His mouth would tremble with contained desire.]

In contrast with the previous passage with juxtaposed clauses, this fragment employs the sentence as its organizing grammatical unit: ‘Lo imagino a John acercándose a los mármoles’ [“I imagine John approaching the marbles”]; ‘Su boca temblaría de contenido deseo’ [“His mouth would tremble with contained desire”]. In the first sentence, governed by coordination, asyndeton and anaphora expose the immediacy of this imaginative ekphrastic contact by concatenating Keats’s impressions around Grecian marbles and sculptures, particularly their corporeal expressions. In this paratactic sequence, each noun phrase contains a series of alliterations: ‘a los *torsos rotos* por el tiempo’ (my emphasis); ‘a los *perfiles límpidos*’ (my emphasis); ‘a las *obsesionantes sonrisas de los rostros arcaicos*’ (my emphasis). As the critic Olivia Moy has recently said, “Written in what one might consider prose poetry... Cortázar uses rhyme, alliteration, and repetition with eye-catching spaces” (“He Star’d Across the Atlantic” 364). These syntactic and phonetic figures—asyndeton, anaphora, and alliteration—are also present in the ode’s last stanza, as if Cortázar would translate their poetic forms into Spanish by *writing* his own *reading*: “O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought, / With forest branches and the trodden weed” (41-43). Apart from these verses’ syntactic symmetry, both anaphora and asyndeton display internal acoustic echoes: ‘of *marble men* and *maidens overwrought*’ (my emphasis); ‘with forest branches and *the trodden weed*’ (my emphasis). The workings of alliteration and parallelism in the romantic poem, resembled by the Argentinean author’s essay, enact the *containment* of their enunciation: ‘Sus labios temblarían de contenido deseo’ [“His mouth would tremble with contained desire”]. Thus, Cortázar’s sentence, governed by the conditional (‘temblarían’; “would tremble”), not

only reveals Keats's ekphrastic experience, but also how the event of reading affects the avant-garde writer's own hybrid style. The conditional, either syntactically or semantically expressed, allows for the rise of a non-appropriative rhetoric that interrupts the practice of hermeneutics.

Cortázar's reading continues as follows:

Con pausas—la espléndida serenidad de la segunda estrofa, y el final de la cuarta y la quinta—todo el poema está recorrido por un temblor verbal que contiene el temblor del friso, su pequeño periplo apasionado. Temblor vivo y a la vez eterno. (269)

[With pauses—the splendid serenity of the second stanza, and the end of the fourth and the fifth—the entire poem is traversed by a verbal trembling that contains the trembling of the frieze, its passionate little journey. Trembling alive, and, at the same time, eternal.]

In this passage, the function of the 'pauses' ("pausas") as both a word and an effect is ambiguous: it can be either the cause of the 'verbal "trembling' ("temblor verbal") or it is an exemption of this permanent 'agitation.' In addition, the parenthetical, arranged here through parataxis, not only offers instances of the poem's pauses, but also interrupts the prose's flow of information. This phenomenon imitates the ode's constant use of caesuras that disrupt the natural cadence of the iambic pentameter; for instance, the oracle's first verse: "Beauty is *truth*, *truth beauty*—*that* is all" (49); (my emphasis). The image of the 'verbal trembling' containing 'the trembling of the frieze' not only suggests how this rhetorical strategy influences Cortázar's poetic form and creative reception, but also dramatizes how a non-appropriative rhetoric governs Keats's ekphrastic experience and its textual representation, a reading previously hinted by the theorist Kenneth Burke when describing the ode's rhetorical questions as an "agitation," a "state of arrest," a suspension of understanding (425). Hence, the figure of the

'verbal trembling' ("temblor verbal"), enacted by the Romantic poet and enunciated by the Argentinean author, constitutes a metaliterary allegory of ekphrasis and reading, respectively.

This trope and this passage invite a preliminary theoretical reflection on the intersection between poetics and rhetoric, especially how certain textual forms, such as rhythm and syntax, create the necessary conditions for *moving*, affecting, or persuading its interlocutors. For this meditation, I would like to put into conversation literary studies and rhetorical theory, particularly the "occasion of writing," traced by Paul Fry in *A Defense of Poetry* (4), and the concept of "rhetoricity," proposed by Diane Davis in *Inessential Solidarity* (2). On the one hand, the former is configured as an "ostensive" instant, a pre-conceptual event, and an indicative gesture that precedes the sedimentation of language as meaning-making (Fry 11). The ostensive moment of literature not only negates diegesis and interrupts foreclosure, but also reveals "the phonic-scriptive aspect of a text, its material character as uninterpreted sound... and as uninterpreted trace" (Fry 54). On the other hand, "rhetoricity" denotes a (pre) originary "affectability," "responsivity" or "persuadability" prior to symbolic action or meaning-making (Davis 2). This condition of possibility exposes the inherent openness between the interlocutors in a particular communicative situation. In this light, we can argue that Cortázar's reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" constitutes an exemplary instance of the ostensive moment of literature as the display of rhetoricity. The poetic exchange between both writers is not only mediated by discursive features, but also, and most importantly, through its phonetic echoes—alliteration—and syntactical arrangements—anaphora and asyndeton—. In addition, parataxis establishes the necessary conditions for coordinating the horizontal relationship between both authors. This non-appropriative rhetoric sustains, therefore, the occasion of Keats's and Cortázar's writing.

Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. California UP, 1969.
- Cortázar, Julio. *Imagen de John Keats*. Alfaguara, 1995.
- Davis, Diane. *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*. Pittsburgh UP, 2010.
- Fry, Paul. *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing*. Stanford UP, 1995.
- Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger, Harvard UP, 1982.
- Kelley, Theresa. "Keats and 'ekphrasis'." *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*. Ed. Susan Wolfson, Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 170-85.
- Moy, Olivia. "From Hampstead to Buenos Aires and Beyond: Anticipating Worlds in Cortázar's *Imagen de John Keats*." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2020, pp. 439-59.
- . "He Star'd Across the Atlantic: The Cortázar-Keats Connection." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2020, pp. 351-78.
- Wolfson, Susan. *Reading Keats*. Cambridge UP, 2015.