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A NIGHTMARE OF NIGHTMARES. A FUSION OF LITERARY AWARENESS AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN JULIO CORTÁZAR

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Julio Cortázar expresses his concern in his introduction to *El libro de Manuel* for the problem of reconciling a political awareness with a literary consciousness. He explains how he later discovered that "el sueño era también parte del libro y contenía la clave de esa convergencia de actividades hasta entonces disímiles".[1] In a novel patched with newspaper cuttings and dealing explicitly with political topics among others, it is precisely the dream, a subversive pattern running throughout the work, that unites the author's literary and political ambition. A nightmare, meanwhile, provides the central theme and key to this convergence of activities in 'Pesadillas', a short story in his recent collection, *Deshoras*.[2] The apparent nightmare of a young girl, Mecha, in coma, affects all those surrounding her within the house and transcends this environment to fuse with the exterior political reality. In this case, the political situation is treated evasively as the clinical nightmare captures narrative attention. However, the indirectness in approach to this oneirico-political phenomenon reveals its importance and allows Cortázar to bridge the gap between political and literary awareness.

Certain narrative techniques reflect this evasion of the political reality particularly well in 'Pesadillas'. Even though Mecha's convulsions may be associated with the political context by repetitive implication, the narrator, most significantly, chooses to remain in the house. In the presence of such a hermetic narrator, description becomes most meaningful. When Mecha's nightmare first begins, for example, the narrator reports:

> Todavía hablaban del termómetro cuando se oyeron los tiros en la esquina, a lo mejor más lejos, por el lado de Gaona (123).

Firstly, he cannot locate the shots accurately, which is typical of the attitude in the household. Doña Luisa, Mecha's mother, and the nurse choose to ignore the sound until Mecha's sudden movement arrests them. The nurse

1 Julio Cortázar, *El libro de Manuel*, Barcelona, Bruguera, 1981.
2 Julio Cortázar, 'Pesadillas' in *Deshoras*. México, Nueva Imagen, 1983.
(All page references will be incorporated in the text within brackets.)

stifles Doña Luisa's scream; yet they do not grasp the significance of Mecha's reaction. Secondly, we detect the narrator's familiarity with his narratee. He situates the shots "por el lado de Gaona" as, at the end, the sirens announcing the soldiers' approach, come from the same place. This insignificant detail only becomes important in the light of the narrator's obliqueness: the first outburst of gunfire foreshadows the final disaster. Similarly, Mecha's first convulsion puts her on the path of recovery. The narrator leaves many things to be understood by his comprehensive narratee. These are, for instance, the only explicit descriptions of the exterior world, apart from a vague reference to the journeys made to and from the faculty by Mecha's brother, Lauro, until the nurse tells Mecha's parents that the whole area has been cordoned off. The narrator designates this difficult task to the neutral nurse, but the parents' reaction to their double imprisonment is slight. Mecha's obstinate shaking of her head at this moment obviously implies much more, by juxtaposition, than the onset of a convulsion. The narrator conscientiously evades external description, but implies its importance by his very reticence.

The narrator's focal character, Lauro, is apparently the only person who can perceive the relationship between Mecha's seizures and the outer world as we observe when he enters her room and:

> sintió la pesadilla, el temblor de las manos... las sirenas afuera otra vez, no debería salir hasta más tarde... (126).

The contagious sensation of Mecha's nightmare immediately recalls his own commitment outside the home. Such glimpses of associations of ideas are typical of the narrator's indirect approach to the exterior reality. Lauro's perception poses a threat to the narrator, and, consequently, even Lauro's inner discourse is carefully mediated.

The narrator's presentation of the adults' hollow speech both reflects their emptiness and impotence to deal with their world, and, indirectly, the relevance of this neglected world. Their apathy is so deep-rooted that they cannot even step outside to look for Lauro, and they prefer to bury themselves in the horror of their domestic nightmare. Once again, this determination to avoid the exterior world, in speech and action, heightens its significance.

The silence of Mecha's illness even contaminates the narrator's choice of narratable material. While acting as constant reminder, by implication, of the outer political context, Mecha remains a controlling enigma within the internal framework. The narrator's thematic emphasis upon this inner world and his structural emphasis upon Lauro's perspective and inner discourse reveal, by opposition, the significance of the outer world, and his repressive structural stance reflects the implied thematic repression. Thus, as I shall attempt to describe in the following pages, the structure of this text mirrors

its thematic content and a literary consciousness fuses with a political awareness.

The narration is divided into six sections. Four particular moments in the development of Mecha's nightmare are related and two sections are devoted to an assessment of the family reaction. With the exception of the final section, the movement within each section is surprisingly similar. In the fourth section, for example, Lauro enters the house and, after making himself something to eat, he goes to see Mecha. The noise of gunfire upsets Doña Luisa —a sound Mecha usually reacts to— as Lauro takes her off to bed. The gunfire has reminded Lauro of the telephone call he must make. However, before leaving, he enters Mecha's room and decides to stay with her rather than risk going outside. As he sits in her room, he hears the dulling television commentary on a World Cup replay and observes the nurse who is carrying "algo que brillaba, una jeringa de inyecciones o una cuchara" (127). Thus, despite his intentions to leave, Lauro remains paralysed, blending the world of apathy and clinical authority in his person. An abstraction of the sequence of actions in this section may be described in the following way:

Entrance|concern for Mecha|stance within the house[3]

This open-ended sequence, which basically describes the action in the first five sections, is illuminating for several reasons.

Firstly, each section opens with an entrance into the household —thereby emphasizing the inner world— except the final section; only at the end of this final section do the soldiers make their brutal entrance in Lauro's absence.

Secondly, the narrator's references to the exterior world are notably indicional —they do not involve action.[4] On the one hand, he mentions the

[3] Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader*, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', pp. 251-296.

In the above article, Roland Barthes establishes two types of relationships in the theory of levels:

a) distributional: if the relations are situated at the same level;

b) integrational: if they are grasped from one level to another.

He determines three levels for his analysis: functions, actions and narration.

The cardinal functions are narrative units that refer to complementary and consequential actions — the 'nuclei' of the narrative — and follow a *distributional* perspective.

A narrative sequence consists of several cardinal functions.

[4] *Ibid.* Barthes also proposes in the above article that in order to understandt what an indicional notation 'is for' one must move to a higher level on the *integrational* axis (level of action or narration).

An *indice* does not refer, like the cardinal function, to a complementary and consequential act but rather to a diffuse concept '(concerning characters' identity and psychology, atmosphere, etc.), p. 264.

sound of gunfire and sirens to which a character always responds. In the first and fifth sections, Lauro's mental reaction links the two worlds, while in the second, third and fourth sections, it is Mecha who demonstrates, through the timing of her convulsions, a sensitivity to the outer world. In the final section, however, the first mention of gunfire is totally ignored by Mecha's father, Señor Botto. Subsequently, the sound of approaching sirens awakens Mecha. On the other hand, the second, third and fourth sections entertain the possibility of telephonic contact with the exterior world. Señor Botto communicates with the doctor, while Lauro plans his mysterious telephone call, which remains an absolute secret between him and the narrator. In the final section, in contrast, the telephonic invasion and the parents futile cry for help foreshadow the ultimate invasion. These indicional references further emphasize the narrator's obliquity and reveal the predominant role played by Mecha and Lauro in linking the two worlds.

Finally, the narrator explicity describes the characters' entrances, but neglects to recount their departures. Each section ends with a static image of one or more characters sitting or standing by Mecha. This immobility both epitomizes the impotence of the members of the household and contrasts vividly with Mecha's contorted movements as she responds to the exterior activity. Consequently, the open-ended nature of this sequence heightens the contrasts between the first five sections and the final section. The text begins with an entrance, continues with a description of an inexplicable illness and concludes with another entrance, which is the true invasion so cleverly alluded to in the third section, which opens with the invasion of medical equipment and doctors. Thus, both the narrator's reticence regarding his character's departure and the contrast between the final section and the others illustrate how the micro-sequence working at sectional level reflects the controlling macro-sequence, wich may be described as follows:

Entrance | Domestic action | Entrance

This sequence outlines a movement towards the inner world, which, in fact, becomes the centre of narration and evasion. The narrator, failing to penetrate Mecha's mind, evidently does not carry this movement to its ultimate consequences. The cardinal functions describe the narrator's commitment to the inner world, while the indices link this world with the outer reality through Lauro and Mecha. The movement outwards is heavily censored as the narrator silences both these characters. Nonetheless, there is a definite movement between the two worlds as the illness dominating the household is correlated with the entrances and the gunfire outside. Furthermore, the sequences are open-ended because they have to be: in this text, where the two worlds fuse into one reality, there is no way out.

The narrator's regulation of narrative information aggravates the concern for communication expressed in this text. Mecha is apparently "invadida por esa cosa que de alguna manera continuaba la larga pesadilla de todos ellos ahí sin comunicación posible..." (123) The narrator implies that something is impeding communication, even among his speaking characters. His own confinement to the house restricts his communicative possibilities and his partial view at once reveals his regulation of narrative information. Narrative information in a text describes the change from one state, such as an event, to another. The narrator may regulate the information he delivers either, in our case, by narrowing the angle of perception to one perspective (focalization) or by establishing a narrative distance from the characters and events through the narrative of words.[5] We have chosen to explore these two means of regulating narrative information because the text reveals an interesting movement between external focalization and spoken discourse and between internal focalization and silent inner discourse. Although Mecha is the centre of the narration, she is focalized externally and her observers' speech is almost always recorded in direct speech. Lauro, the subject of internal focalization, speaks little, but his inner discourse is vital to the text as it stresses the narrative emphasis on the inner frame and links the inner and outer worlds. Spoken discourse and external focalization characterize the clinical crisis, while internal focalization and inner discourse reflect the external political crisis and the link between the two

[5] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Jane E. Lewin (trans.), Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981.

In this study Genette separates voice from mode determining that there is a great difference between the question of mood (who sees?) and the question of voice (who speaks?).

The concepts of *perspective* and *narrative distance* are analysed under his chapter on Mood, pp. 161-211.

I *Focalization*: two systems of focalization concern us in our study:

a) Narrative with *external focalization*: the hero performs before us, but his mind is not penetrated and the narrator says less than the character knows.

b) Narrative with variable internal focalization: the minds of two characters are penetrated and the narrator *should* say as much as the character knows.

II *Narrative distance*: Genette proposes that both the narrative of words and the narrative of events establish narrative distance. This distance depends on the extent of the narrator's intervention. Under his analysis of the *narrative of words*, Genette describes four states of discourse, which are listed from the most distant to the most immediate:

a) Narratized speech: Presented in the past tense with none of the original syntactical structures. Otherwise known as 'reported speech'.

b) Transposed speech: i) Indirect speech: Presented in the past tense and, although some of the original structures may be present, the narrator's presence is clearly perceptible in the syntax of the sentence. ii) Free indirect style: Presented in the past tense but without a declarative verb.

c) Quoted direct speech: Presented in the present tense with all the character's original syntactical structures.

d) Immediate speech: Interior monologue in which th narrator is obliterated and the character takes his place.

worlds. The difficulty of communication is a feature of both the political and domestic nightmare.

Although the narration in 'Pesadillas' is subsequent to the event, the narrator's regulation of narrative information decreases the distance between the narrating instance and the events as the reader relives this experience with its narrator. Obsessed with the actual nature of the nightmare, the narrator focalizes Mecha externally. Although external focalization carries circumspection to a limit in this narrative, the treatment of Lauro, the focal character, also discloses the narrator's indirectness. The movement between these two systems of focalization allows the narrator to have two principal characters.

External focalization is particularly obvious when the doctor and Mecha's parents converse. Their direct discourse is always punctuated like the narrative of events and, at times, is difficult to distinguish from the non-action:

> Esperar, lo decían todos, hay que esperar... también el doctor Raimondi, hay que esperar, a veces se da una reacción..., hay que esperar, Señor Botto, sí doctor pero ya van dos semanas..., dos semanas que está como muerta, doctor, ya lo sé, Señora Luisa... (121).

In this passage, we immediately detect the reticence of the narrator, who, concealed in the shadows, only reports part of their conversation and has no intention of divulging their thoughts. The constant repetition streaming forth from the hollowness of empty minds is an insult to the reader who searches for something other than mundane cliches. The first declarative verb discloses the narrator's presence, but he soon withdraws, leaving the characters to identify each other through their replies.

The absence of the narrator in this direct mode of speech creates an interesting effect. Punctuated by Doña Luisa's religious exclamation and the respectful use of proper names, it blends naturally with the narrative of events and also portrays its characters. Señor Botto is characterized as a factual, indifferent man, who speaks little, and his wife does all the worrying and suffering for them both. The doctor, meanwhile, represents the clinical voice of authority.[6] In addition, the unconventional presentation of this mode makes us wonder, at times, whether we are witnessing inner or spoken discourse. These bewildered, frightened voices, mediated by the dull, pretentious doctor, act as a kind of chorus throughout the text, providing information and echoing the atmosphere of resignation and impotence reigning in the household. The narrator's presence may be felt, however, in

[6] In this story so full of sound, very few physical characteristics are given. One of the most outstanding is the description of the nurse knitting — this ominous image of Fate accompanies us throughout the story as the click of her needles rings in our ears.

the thematic restriction of these conversations: their chatter is confined to Mecha and the inner world.

Although the text centres upon the inner world, the characters' thoughts are only presented when they establish some physical contact with the exterior world, as in the case of Lauro and his father. Internal focalization, therefore, both links these two worlds and creates a division. The division is dectected firstly in the characters' attitude as they regard all intruders with suspicion and indifference. Lauro's vague reply to his father's inquiry, for example, causes Señor Botto to comment ambiguously: "Vos sabrás lo que hacés, muchacho... pero andate con cuidado' " (125). Secondly, the narrator highlights the division between the children and their parents through Lauro's thoughts. The children's reactions create a link between the two worlds while their parents shelter behind the shield of indifference and ignorance.

The narrative emphasis upon Lauro and Mecha reveals the intimate link between the two children and their subtle distinction. Both characters are focused, but the narrator only allows himself access to one consciousness. Thus, their nocturnal communion, which permits Lauro to reflect upon his exterior commitment, is necessarily unbalanced since only Lauro can communicate verbally. As Lauro enters Mecha's room, the sound of the sirens contrasts significantly with the replay of the World Cup match in the othe room: " 'Sí, de eso hablan mucho', pensó Lauro. Se levantaría temprano para telefonearle a Lucero..." (127). The highlighting of this irrelevant thought within inverted commas underlines the narrator's repression and Lauro's silence. One may talk endlessly about World Cup replays, but one cannot even think about one's political commitment, let alone talk about it. In the fifth section, Lauro's journey from the centre brings him face to face with his own unspoken and unspeakable reality:

> ...él ahí necesitando hablarle de tantas cosas, como Mecha a lo mejor estaba hablándole desde su lado, desde los ojos cerrados y los dedos que dibujaban letras inútiles en las sábanas (128).

The two characters who appear to perceive the horror of the outer reality cannot communicate; the narrator's phrase "a lo mejor" emphasizes his own evasion of Mecha's consciousness. The wonderful echo of language in this passage, which creates a thematic and structural reflection, gives the impression of blending the two characters into one image: Mecha acts as the inner reflection of Lauro's outer silence and fear.

This bond between Lauro and Mecha accounts for the narrator's emphasis on these two characters. He only resorts to their father's perspective when Lauro disappears in the final section: on one occasion, to recount the out-

burst of machine-gun fire and the subsequent silence as Señor Botto stands looking out of the window; and on another to record the movement towards the enclosed interior as he decides not to make a telephone inquiry regarding Lauro. Both incursions into Botto's mind reveal his total evasion of the outer reality and the narrator's structural and thematic restriction on the human mind. Botto, for instance, chooses to ignore the noisy intrusion of gunfire as he stands contemplating the television programme he has just seen:

> ...se oían ráfagas de ametralladora..., de pronto la calma, casi demasiada, ni siquiera un patrullero, mejor irse a dormir, esa mujer (del telejuego)... era un fenómeno, ...al final la cultura daba más plata que ser martillero público (129).

This and the following sentence begins with the narrator's account of Lauro's absence and the echo of the final comment reverberates through the reader's mind as the soldiers hammer on the door and the interior frame collapses. The first part of this passage appears to reflect the narrator's voice, although the peculiar character of free indirect speech makes its authorship ambiguous.[7] However, the comment "casi demasiada" resembles other observations made by the narrator: the nurse was "casi enojada" when Doña Luisa lost her pills and Lauro was "casi sorprendido" when his father addressed him so affectionately. Thus, we may attribute the nature of the outer silence to the narrator and the excitement of the television programme to Botto. The association between silence and sleep draws us into Botto's numb mind. While his evasion of the outer sound discloses the narrator's severe thematic restriction, we may wonder if he also wishes to go to sleep as the structural confusion suggests.

The decision to go to bed recalls Lauro's thought when faced with the impossibility of communication: "era mejor irse en seguida puesto que no podía hacer nada" (128). This confusion of voices in indirect free style once again blurs the dividing line between character and narrator. However, the repeated idea establishes a subtle union between father and son in their desire to escape. This represents a fine example of the narrator's obliquity, and both characters are restrained by the repressive narrator. The decisions differ, however, in that Lauro wishes to avoid Mecha and leave the house, while his father wishes to avoid the outer world and forget its conflicts in sleep: Lauro's activity contrasts with his father's passiveness. Thus, Lauro's decision creates a link between the two worlds while the narrator only implies this link through Botto's inner discourse. The narrator suggests that

[7] The peculiar character of free indirect style, as Genette defines it, is the absence of a declarative verb. This may lead to a double confusion:

a) between inner and spoken speech.

b) between the speech of the character and that of the narrator.

Botto is aware of the outer conflict, but Botto's self-imposed repression is so ingrained that he cannot even express this awareness to himself. Botto's physical action establishes an explicit link between the two worlds, whereas his deathly silence regarding his true fears heightens the significance of this union.

Lauro most convincingly illustrates the link between the inner and outer world. He grows in importance as a focal characters until his final disappearance, and he is characterized principally through his direct inner discourse. His colloquial, affectionate speech, addressed solely to Mecha, adds a vital perspective to the narrative of events as it brings her alive and associates her with his plight:

> ...hermanita... loca de mierda, pajarraca, mandá esa comedia al diablo y vení que tengo tanto que contarte, hermanita... (128).

Lauro's optimistic tone contrasts with the negative attitude resounding throughout the narration. The narrator discloses a certain narrative apathy, perhaps associated with fear, through his use of the imperfect tense to express repetitive, monotonous action, his own repetition of other characters' ideas and words, and the rhythm of his narration. The narrator chooses, for example, to create a distance from Lauro when he is thinking about the telephone call by recording his thoughts in narratized speech:

> Cuando se oyeron las sirenas pensó que hubiera tenido que telefonear al número que le había dado Lucero, pero no debía hacerlo desde la casa y no era cuestión de salir a la calle justo después de las sirenas (124).

This passage combines all aspects mentioned throughout the narrative negarding the telephone call. The political context is very present and yet prohibitive as the sirens both remind Lauro of the telephone call and prevent him from making it. The narrator's evasive report lacks all the spontaneity and directness of Lauro's direct inner discourse. In fact, we may even doubt the narrator's credibility as he points out on two occasions that Lauro should not make this call from the house. This satisfies the narratee's curiosity and helps him understand the nature of the call, but the pattern of cause and effect is too narratorial to be convincing. These obtuse references to the telephone call unite the narrator and Lauro in an unbreakable bond of secrecy.

The first symptoms of this secret intimacy may be observed in the move towards internal focalization when Lauro stands outside the house contemplating Mecha (this marks the narrator's only venture into the exterior world during this narrative period):

> Lauro... pensaba hoy sí, hoy la voy a encontrar despierta, ...seguro que está sentada en la cama y hablando con mamá, pero había que seguir esperando, siempre igual m'hijito, ... (121).

Lauro's entrance is not mentioned until his father addresses him. The final externalized intrusion of soldiers, meanwhile, is described in detail and contrasts with this oblique entrance. We might suggest that the whole passage is focalized through Lauro if it were not for the narrator's subtle intervention, introduced by the conjunction 'pero'. The dampening ring of his statement in the imperfect tense contrasts vividly with Lauro's direct discourse in the present tense. The iterative narration of Lauro's thoughts emphasizes the narrator's severe restriction on the human mind: each time Lauro returns home, he apparently thinks the same. It is, however, the focal character's unrelated entrance that reveals the narrator's deviousness and links the two worlds so effectively. He does not have to narrate the entrance since he is in Lauro's mind and, on this occasion, faithfully perceives this vision of his focal character.

The narrator's decision to restrict Lauro's vision almost exclusively to the inner world may be considered a paralipsis[8] that strengthens the intimacy between the two. This restriction, however, may be interpreted as a violation of the code of internal focalization. The narrator appears to fear the spontaneous outburst of powerful feelings and places his focal character in a metaphorical straitjacket. Lauro's thoughts, presented in inner discourse, may only concern the inner nightmare and when they border on his external commitment, the narrator hastens to create a distance as we have already observed. The selection of appropriate material and structure reflects the narrator's fear of the outer unknown. He seems, however, to be aware of the necessity to regulate narrative information regarding Lauro as we observe when he recounts that Lauro thought "como en ráfagas de miedo, de querer aferrarse a Mecha, ni una palabra en voz alta porque la enfermera o doña Luisa no dejaban nunca sola a Mecha..." (128). The "ráfagas de ametralladora" heard in the final section echo Lauro's "ráfagas de miedo" and a subtle link is subsequently formed between the two worlds. Lauro only fears the inner nightmare in that it reflects the outer reality. Thus, the necessity for the narrator's repressive attitude is apparently justified, since violation of codes and repression lie at the heart of this text. Internal focalization and inner discourse clearly disclose the link between the two worlds and the nature of the external crisis.

8 Paralipsis: according to Genette in the above-mentioned work, the classical type of paralipsis in the code of internal focalization is the omission of some important action or thought of the focal character of which neither the hero nor the narrator can be ignorant. An example of this may be found in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie.

The intimacy between the narrator and his focal character is therefore a most interesting aspect of internal focalization. They share information and fears unknown to the other characters, and, we suspect, often unknown to the reader. The narrator's characteristic use of free indirect style, linking the two worlds and voices, makes it difficult, at times, to tell them apart. When Doña Luisa asks Lauro about the noise outside, for example, Lauro replies:

> 'Nada, mamá, unos tiros lejos, ya sabés'. Pero qué sabía en realidad doña Luisa, para qué hablar más. Ahora sí... tendría que bajar hasta el almacén y desde ahí llamarlo a Lucero (126).

The temptation to attribute this whole passage to Lauro is great. However, Lauro would not call his mother 'Doña Luisa' and we may conclude, especially when we notice the conjunction 'pero', that the narrator is offering his opinion. He always refers to Lauro's mother as 'Doña Luisa', while the doctor and nurse always call her 'señora Luisa'. An implicit relation between the inner and outer worlds is established through the association of ideas as Lauro remembers the telephone call. This association of ideas is a constant, as we have noted, in all the references to the telephone call. The discursive confusion between the narrator and Lauro reveals their similar train of thought and distinguishes various traits of a narrator (besides those already mentioned), who, although he is not a character, almost becomes one.

The narrator, unlike Lauro, is imprisoned within the house and Mecha's nightmare is portrayed through his description. He reserves the characters to register reactions and fears. When Mecha's nightmare begins, the narrator describes her corporal activity in staccato phrases, which reflect the convulsive movements. As Doña Luisa prays for Mecha's inexplicable motion to end, the narrator records:

> Pero no se terminaba, volvió a empezar una hora más tarde... la pesadilla ...volviendo sin que pudiera rechazarla, estar a su lado y mirarla y hablarle sin que nada de lo de fuera le llegara... (123).

The conjunction 'pero' signals the change from Doña Luisa's voice to the narrator's voice. As the narrator describes the nightmare, he reveals his own frustration and obsession: he is at Mecha's side and talking to her, but nothing reaches her. Later, Lauro senses the same frustration: "Cada vez que se acercaba a la cama de Mecha era la misma sensación de contacto imposible" (128). While Mech is a "prisionera a través de paredes de piel" that no-one can penetrate, the narrator is a captive of the internal framework and Lauro's freedom of thought and speech is controlled.

The narrator's temporal accuracy, detected in the above quotation and evident throughout the text, contrasts with Lauro's vagueness: he "aparecía a cualquier hora y se quedaba un rato" (128). This is a deceptive technique in a narrator who withholds so much information. We may suggest that the narrator's imprisonment obliges him to keep track of time, in which case these temporal markings indicate a sign of narrative sanity. Furthermore, they serve to punctuate a narrative in which voice blends with event and the characters become as lost as time itself in iterative monotony: "Hasta el tiempo se mezclaba o se perdía en ese esperar continuo..." (127).

In the final section, Lauro's disappearance creates chaos as the narrative attention shifts from Mecha to Lauro. The narrator's distance from Mecha and his proximity to Lauro, whose absence directly concerns their secret in the outer world, may be observed when he relates: "Eran más de las siete cuando la enfermera vino a buscar a doña Luisa" (130). The verb 'vino' indicates the narrator's eventual withdrawal from Mecha's room, while throughout the text he has recorded others' entrances: for example, in the second section "el señor Botto vino de la sala", Lauro always enters her room, but notably in the final section "no vino para la cena". These examples highlight the importance of the continual sense of invasion denoted in the micro- and macro-sequence. The parents are left to narrate their search for Lauro through their discourse and the narrator's apparent impotence with words at this moment reflects Mecha's inability to communicate with her parents. Mecha shakes her head obstinately, while her father exclaims that "no, nadie sabía nada, seguro que el pibe tampoco podía pasar..." and her mother continues in direct speech:

> —No es eso, Eduardo, no es eso, seguro que le ha ocurrido algo, no puede ser que a esta hora sigamos sin saber nada, Lauro siempre... (130).

All persist in the negative, but there is no communication and the verbal and thematic repetition eventually wears itself out in an unfinished sentence; Mecha's physical obstinacy reflects her parents' unspoken fears. This wonderful echo of despairing negation rings throughout the hollow inner frame as Mecha's uncoordinated head and arm movement, an apparent reaction to an external incident, subtly mirrors the lack of communication. The narrator has cleverly sustained this shift in narrative attention to his focal character so as to emprasize the link, which can never be made explicit, between the two worlds of this narrative.

Therefore, the narrator, who is free to wander wherever he pleases, decides to imprison himself within one context, and confine his narrative to one consciousness and one topic. His decision, however, is characteristically oblique and ambiguous. His indirect narration contrasts acutely with the

immediacy of Lauro's lively discourse. Also this resolution obviously affects his characters, who move at his command. His increasing emphasis upon night and darkness reveals the dull state of coma overwhelming both characters and narrator. The characters' monotonous activity and empty conversation match the narrator's apathy or — we might suggest — fear, shown in so many different ways. The external pessimism opposes Lauro's optimism. However, even Lauro fears the light that might pierce the darkness. This penetrated consciousness, although longing for Mecha's recovery, fears the one symptom that will clearly mark it: the "mirada desde adentro buscando salir". The outer reflection of a hidden inner truth would be hard to face. Lauro must, therefore, conceal himself behind the narrator's mask and allow this authoritarian presence to handle him. Both he and the narrator fear the subject of external focalization and the possible reason for her gesticulations. No-one is prepared to face the resolution of this enigma. Mecha's nightmare, the topic, contributes to other nightmares and reflects the visual and sonorous horror of the exterior world. Lauro's role as a focal character is essential in portraying the link between the two worlds as he enters the house to reveal his fears to Mecha regarding his external commitment. This union, however, is always ambiguous and the narrative filter is still present when Mecha finally awakens:

> ...Mecha abrió los párpados, los ojos velados por la tela que se había ido depositando durante semanas... (131).

The lights are on, the stage is set, and, as the narrator loses his accomplice and focal character, the curtain rises on Mecha, whose silent contortions join the two worlds and embody the gradual externalization of the narrative. The narrator's countdown to the final invasion concludes as he tentatively penetrates Mecha's senses: "...acaso sus oídos escuchaban ahora la multiplicación de las sirenas..." (131). There can surely be no doubt by now of the importance of Mecha's nightmare as a reflector of and key to the outer reality.

The nightmare that consumes everyone's attention is susceptible to a bi-isotopic reading (two levels of coherence). As we have observed throughout this study, the narrator centres upon the domestic context, so dominated and identified by Mecha's illness, and he chooses to ignore the outer reality to a great extent. This illness becomes everyone's nightmare as Mecha begins to have seizures and it is definitely this denotative reading that is emphasized throughout the text. All the characters contribute to this medical isotopy through their discourse — Mecha is, until the final section, the only topic of conversation — and the narration is almost entirely devoted to a description of her illness and reactions to it. The narrator, a witness to every change, describes her first seizure in detail:

> ...los tres vieron cómo el temblor se repetía en todo el cuerpo de Mecha, una rápida serpiente corriendo del cuello hasta los pies, un moverse de los ojos bajo los párpados, la leve crispación que alteraba las facciones, como una voluntad de hablar, de quejarse, el pulso más rápido, el lento regreso a la inmovilidad (123).

This description contains many characteristics of a classical seizure. Her rapid eye movement and uncontrolled corporal activity become recurrent features of the narrator's description; her reaction to the external sound appears to be as uncontrollable as her mother's reaction to her. Doña Luisa's cry of horror is echoed in the final section both when Mecha awakens and when the soldiers arrive: the whole context is a living nightmare of horror. The narrator captures the outstading traits of this convulsion beautifully and precisely. He further stresses this clinical reading by recounting that lighter attacks follow this first seizure at regular intervals and by insisting upon the coincidence between the sound of gunfire or sirens and the onset of a convulsion. These sounds determine her threshold and, indeed, she only awakens when the sound is continuous. At this moment, the narrator captures the return to consciousness succinctly as Mecha tries to identify her parents and the surroundings: "...los ojos de Mecha... pasaban poco a poco de doña Luisa al señor Botto, de la enfermera al cielo raso, ..." (131). All stand hypnotized by this movement and the clinical case paralyses into a final stance. Mecha has recuperated from her illness, but its stimulant, the external sound, has announced its arrival and intrusion. It is now no longer a threat; it is an actuality.

The soldiers' entry makes the second possible reading of Mecha's nightmare explicit: clearly it may be interpreted as a political statement as this study has hopefully shown. The narrator's evasion of this reality implies too much: his self-imposed repression and his repression of the characters' discourse inevitably reflects the repression experienced in a political context. This indirect communication extends to Lauro and the narrator who both interpret Mecha's nightmare as one of frustrated communication; her first seizure revealed "una voluntad de hablar, de quejarse" (123). Her futile attempt at communication both portrays her repressive imprisonment and reflects Lauro's nightmare of repression developing in the exterior world:

> Mecha tan cerca y como llamándolo, los vagos signos de los dedos y esa mirada desde adentro, buscando salir, algo que seguía y seguía, ...su llamada insoportablemente inútil (128).

The narrator, mediating Lauro's thoughts, cleverly misunderstands the outer manifestation, Mecha's sign language, and appears to encroach upon the forbidden inner territory as he describes her inward look. This fear of sight,

perhaps of confrontation and open recognition, makes her attempt intolerable to Lauro. The narrator's deviousness here recalls his careful planting of the seed 'conscience' among the doctor's hollow words: "todo es vegetativo... no hay conciencia... su hija no sufre..." (124). However, Mecha's gesticulations seem to prove that her conscience is at work even in her unconscious state and, evidently, the duplicity of this lexical item escapes the doctor. Mecha is trapped and her freedom to communicate has been denied. The narrator implies that only his own and his characters' restricted speech can be trusted. However, his severe repression makes us doubt him, especially in the face of Mecha's reaction. The direct presentation of the clinical context emphasizes the significance of the implicit context, as the nightmare denies freedom of expression at every level.

The coincidence between Mecha's convulsions and the external sounds of strife marks the narrator's obliquity once again as he implies a relationship with the outer world. The inner convulsive state echoes the outer crisis. These indirect associations characterize his description of Mecha's illness. For example, her coma began as "el brusco apagón una tarde después de la fiebre y los dolores, de golpe el silencio, ... la respiración lejana y tranquila" (122). This recalls the sound of gunfire in the final section, which Señor Botto faces in — we could almost say — a coma:

> se oían ráfagas de ametralladora por el lado de Plaza Irlanda, de pronto la calma, casi demasiada, ni siquiera un patrullero... (129).

As the coma took the place of Mecha's feverish illness, the outer silence replaces the feverish sound of machine-gun fire. This eery calm — frightening the narrator — reminds us of his description of Mecha at the beginning.

> Única cosa tranquila allí donde médicos... hasta que poco a poco la mala broma de Mecha había sido más fuerte, dominándolos a todos...
> La única tranquila aparte de la enfermera tejiendo... (122).

Mecha is calm, but her inexplicable illness oppresses the entire household. In the following section, the narrator relates how the nightmare began, just as the invasion of soldiers at the end follows the earlier ominous calm. The narrator could hardly be more indirect and yet more obvious. The gradual process of oppression caused by Mecha's illness reflects the sirens of the approaching intruders, as the two nightmares fuse into one reality.

The silence of the two children contrasts with the soldiers' brutal hammering as they force their way in to impose a repression already present in this narrative. The narrator, fearing this intrusion, remains within the clinical context throughout and we, therefore, observe a hierarchical relation-

ship between these two suggested readings – which at once reveals the narrator's obliqueness yet again. The medical isotopy is clearly the explicit first meaning proposed, while the political isotopy is a reading constructed connotatively. This very proposition reveals how Cortázar has used his fictitious nightmare to transmit a political awareness.

'Pesadillas' is a story of reflections. The depth of the mirror's reach is beautifully restricted by these reflections that work at every level. The domestic foreground is seen against an impressive political backcloth and the characters within this world are neatly matched, each providing a reflection for the other. Lauro and Mecha are intimately united in this critical moment and opposed to their parents who apathetically mirror each other's impotence. The doctor and nurse offer the medical voice of authority: the nurse's sympathy and involvement (especially noted in her despair in the final section) contrast with the doctor's cool detachment. Even though the narrator is technically not a character, his intimacy with Lauro offers him an accomplice in evasion. While Mecha's nightmare principally mirrors the exterior crisis, it also reveals Lauro's personal nightmare of repressive silence and his mother's nightmare of agony and suffering. The captivity of each character opposes the possibility of freedom of movement, thought and expression. Mecha, a prisoner in coma, reflects the captivity of the other characters and their silent frustration at their own incompetence and fear.

At a macro-level, the structure mirrors the thematic content. The narrative of words fuses with the narrative of events to reveal the inevitability of the reflection between the two nightmarish frames: spoken discourse and external focalization dominate the reticent inner world, while inner discourse and internal focalization link the two worlds. This relationship between the structural and thematic levels of the narrative is further illustrated by the narrator's abuse of the narrative code. His indirectness and obliqueness at a structural level reflect the repression implied at a thematic level and his violation of the code of internal focalization mirrors the final abusive entrance of the soldiers. Violation of freedom and rights haunts this nightmare of agony and insufferable repression where communication is almost impossible. The work of art that embraces this impossibility, however, represents the possibility of communication; a communication that reconciles a literary consciousness with a political awareness.

The fictitious nightmare, which fuses the two worlds of this narrative, sets the stage for an interplay between structure and thematic content. At both levels the repression of an authoritarian presence is detected: the narrator has adopted the characteristics of his underlying theme and he therefore restrains speech and thought in the portrayal of a girl's illness. His structural techniques become the props that support his thematic content and reveal

his literary consciousness. The political statement underlying the fictitious nightmare is subtly and cleverly constructed in the hands of a master of indirectness. Cortázar's careful manipulation of the different strata of his narrative reveals his consciousness in every sphere. The nightmare, which reflects the silent sensitivity of an agonized individual, discloses the lack of freedom of expression that threatens to transcend the textual framework. The difficulty of communication becomes the reader's nightmare as he struggles to come to terms with this text. The authorities at a structural and thematic level have imposed their restrictive presence but their severity cannot prevent the possibility of communication. The task is difficult but the battle is won and Cortázar succeeds in reconciling a political awareness with a literary consciousness. Our nightmare of nightmares is over and our patience is rewarded. The text finds no way out, but its creator does, and the artistic creation remains as a monument to our victory over those who attempt to violate our right to the freedom of expression and interpretation.

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