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THE TALE IS THE JUNGLE: CRITICAL-ECOLOGICAL READING OF *LOS CUENTOS DE LA SELVA* BY HORACIO QUIROGA

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Abstract || The main purpose of this article is to use a critical and ecological approach to read Horacio Quiroga's text *Los cuentos de la Selva* (1984) so to think about, what I have intended to name, ecological discourse. In order to achieve this objective, I will analyze how character's speech reveals a "jungle communication". Animals talk but not like human beings do. They use words to talk about native life but they do not talk about important human topics such as soul, thought, and so on. Words are used as an ecological system. Tigers and boas dialogues and toucan expressions have a particular interest: jungle as an event. We can affirm that Quiroga imagines jungle creating characters able to "talk the green" and to "dialogue the habitat".

Keywords || Horacio Quiroga | *Los cuentos de la selva* | Ecology | Jungle | Event | Word.

0. Introduction: Ecological Speech

Debe de ser hora de dormir –murmuró Anaconda. Y pensando deponer suavemente la cabeza [...] la aplastó contra el suelo en el sueño final.

Horacio Quiroga

In “Juan Darién”, one of the *Cuentos de la Selva* (1984) by Horacio Quiroga, we can hear a character talking to the crowd with the following words: “¡Marquémoslo con rayas de fuego! ¡Quemémoslo en los fuegos artificiales!” (Quiroga, 1984: 213). This character, also known as “the tamer”, is in front of a tiger. It is important to know that the beast referred to, and which a whole village wants to exterminate, has lived for a long period among the people, hiding itself under the appearance of a child. When discovered, it is apprehended by the crowd. Although the child-tiger’s prayers to be released, “perdón” (Quiroga, 1984: 212), people torture and batter it: “En el fondo de la jaula, arrinconado, aniquilado en un rincón, sólo quedaba un cuerpecito sangriento de niño, que había sido Juan Darién. Vivía aún y aún podía caminar cuando se le sacó de ahí” (Quiroga, 1984: 212).

For the interests of the current article, I want to draw attention on the words “quemémoslo” and “marquémoslo” (213). According to the chosen critical perspective¹, these expressions, inside the fictional world of the *Cuentos de la Selva* (1984), are integrated into what we could call *human speech*: statements produced by anthropomorphic characters who install, on the narrative of the tales, the issue of the destruction of nature. According to our vision, every time a human character talks in one tale or another, he reiterates the death of fauna and the ecosystem in general. Human speech appears only to plan, announce, order and run the destruction and the devastation of the habitat: “¡matémosle en seguida!” (213); “no cuesta nada probar un primer tiro” (151). However, this type of speech contrasts and opposes an ecological speech: statements of the animal-characters of *Cuentos de la Selva* in which we read the future of nature. If the human speech orders, plans, etc the destruction of nature, ecological speech shows the jungle, it presents it as a word². My reflection is to be focused in the analysis of the ecological speech. We’ll study it in the tales: “La Anaconda”, “El regreso de Anaconda”, “Juan Darién”, “La Abeja Haragana” and “Las Medias de los Flamencos”, pieces that are part of the *Cuentos de la Selva* by Horacio Quiroga.

As a hypothesis, we think that the statements pronounced by the animals of Quiroga’s tales contain the jungle; in what is said by the snakes, tigers, ants, a “jungle” communication type is revealed. The animal characters talk but not as humans. They use words, but these

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1 | The perspective to which we refer is ecological literary criticism, which studies the relationship between culture and nature present in artworks; this critical trend approaches the artwork assuming it establishes a fundamental relationship with the environment where it is created. The piece reproduces the rhythms of nature; never moves aside of an imagined environment. To the ecological literary criticism, the ecosystem is the place for the artwork to be. Karl Kroeber declares, “Ecological literary criticism concentrates on linkages between natural and cultural process [...] Ecological criticism is holistic [...]” (Kroeber, 1994: 1).

2 | For the purposes of our articles it is necessary to understand the ecological speech as a word declared by the characters-animals of Quiroga’s tales, being the target to reveal, show and imagine the rhythm of nature; the ecological speech can be understood as well as a word where the jungle is the content and, therefore, the form. Kroeber, referring to the Shelley’s poem “West Wind”, declares: “nature must be conceivable as more than systems of repetitive regularity, The west wind must be acclimated within the imagining mind if it is to become the vehicle of any humanly significant “resurrection”, that is, a revival that is more than cyclical repetition” (Kroeber, 1994: 122). The ecological speech in that situation catches and makes evident natural becoming.

words, rather than helping in the discussion of problems historically relevant for humankind (the soul, reason, science, etc.), reflect the events of nature; words function as an ecosystem. The dialogs of the tigers, the statements of the boas, the expressions of the toucans, are animated and determined by another concern: the jungle as an event. What an animal argues with another, the words they use, are jungle itself, so we can affirm that Quiroga imagines the jungle by creating animal characters capable to talk the green, dialogue the habitat, capable of saying what is not properly human, and that happens in the river, at the tree, etc.; in this case, it is important to remember what Karl Kroeber affirms in his book *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) “words may manifest how processes of external nature and processes of human imagining can be mutually reinforcing” (Kroeber, 1994: 121).

Therefore, to our hypothesis we have to add the following: if for ecology, “science of relations-ships” (Mcdowell, 1995: 372) all bees and parrots and flowers communicate with each other somehow, if there exists a link among all living beings, Quiroga makes this strange language understandable; his imagined animals talk and, in that event, the reader discovers that “other” communication that is the jungle; so we can affirm that, in the case of *Cuentos de la Selva*, we are not in front of animals being humanized: if they say and speak in Spanish it is to express a “language” that happens in the forest, and that, to use an oxymoron, is the silence of the jungle itself.

1. Jungle and Murmur

Sintió en su corazón herido que ante la
suprema ley del universo, una vida equivale
a otra vida...

Horacio Quiroga

To start my reflection, I want to post a question that, to my judgement, is a key to understanding what we have called “ecological speech”: in the jungle, does there really exist a way of communication between living beings? To answer it, we will look at some studies that talk about how life is produced in American tropical forests. In this way, for example, in the article titled *Soil and soils process research*, (1994) Phillip Sollins affirms that the soil of the forest cannot be understood isolated from the weather, topography, plants and, in general, isolated from the life that travels through and grows up on it. To this author, the jungle soil is fully integrated with live and lifeless beings, who establish an indissoluble relationship, through which they transform the soil and are transformed themselves as well. Thanks to the relationship established between the beings and the soil, they feed themselves, are hunted, die, decompose, etc.

So, all metamorphoses of the soil are possible because the totality of living and lifeless beings intervene in them and vice versa; phenomenon that explains how the soil is linked to two key events to understand the jungle: fertility and death. "Soils with correlative factors, such as climate and topographic position, strongly influence plant growth, survival and reproductive success" (Sollins, 1994: 34). Fertility and death happen as relationships are established between soil, weather and living beings as a group: "soil physical structure is important because it affects 3 espe-holding capacity (thus, plants) rates and pathways of 3 espe-infiltration, and aeration and microbial activity" (Sollins, 1994: 46). In such a way, when speaking of the jungle soil, it is necessary to appeal to the term "correspondence" (Sollins, 1994: 45), which allows the approaching to the interconnections that happen between the jungle's live and dead forces, which never let the soil be inactive. The soil moves, happens, breathes, dies and is born. It is transit, it wakes up with the birds, it is becoming: fruit, snake, earth: metamorphosis.

On the other hand, in the book titled *Tropical Nature* (1995), Ken Miyata and Adrian Forsyth, in the chapter called "Fertility", draw attention to what they call "tremendous mass of life" (19). With respect to this, it is necessary to post some questions that would help us focus on the problem carried out on their investigation: how can the life of so many beings be kept active in a place like the jungle?, under which energy requirements?, where do so many nutrients come from, necessary to provide life to millions and millions of animals and plants?, what sylvan process provides food in a constant way to all living beings? When we post these questions, we must be amazed, since the imagination would not be enough to decode the amount of food that day by day living beings demand to the sylvan habitat. How does the jungle manage to supply food to all its beings?, what processes, movements and exchanges happen in it to make it possible? Authors try to elaborate an answer to these questions.

To allow energy and food to flow through the jungle, a process that investigators call "close association between" (19) is necessary. Through this process, each living and lifeless being acts as a food transformer and as an energy carrier. It is as if everything, birds, rivers, leaves, worked to make nutrients circulate. Each being would have a function in that sense. There is not one that does not have this attribute. All of them, tigers, anacondas, fishes, flowers, are pipes through which life, energy and food go on. The totality of the beings that inhabit the jungle are in charge of transforming those three components and, therefore, assure their mobility, their flow; they carry them deep inside and, even more, provide them to others

when, for example, a being hunts and feeds itself with another one or when, for example, a parrot pecks a fruit: “there is a dynamic balance in this rapid turnover of life and death” (Miyata, Forsyth, 1995: 19). Without the association between these beings, life in the jungle would be impossible. This community of exchanges assures life to be kept and renewed and, therefore, nutrients and energy keep going on.

In a third article, *Ecosofía Makuna* (1993), written by Kaj Arhem, a dilemma is posed: how is life in the jungle perceived by an indigenous community. If biologists and botanicals explain how jungle works through correlations and associations between living beings, in the case of the Makuna people, jungle is explained by a cosmogony in which wildlife, the other apparently different to human being, is perceived as an equal. To the Makuna people, animals do possess a spirit; they have houses, social life, they dance and paint their faces to do their rituals. Fishes, for example, disguise themselves as fishes, but when they get their beds, under the water, they pull their masks off and become people again: another people that lives under the water. This not only happens with fishes but with the rest of the animals as well. But the special thing of the cosmological vision of this culture is that the other, different of the human being, besides having spirit and being equal, is seen as well as a possible predator or as source of nourishment: “Todas las otras formas de vida son clasificadas como ‘nuestra comida’ o ‘aquellos que se alimentan de nosotros’ (Arhem, 1993: 111).

In this case, for the Makuna people, there exists other peoples disguised as animals that supply nourishment to them or, otherwise, eat them. Makuna people receive energy from human people disguised as animals and at the same time, they supply food to other people who need them. In order to keep the food going on, it is necessary, however, to attend the ritual:

Cuando los animales bailan ellos se reproducen y multiplican a sí mismos [...]cuando la gente baila en este mundo, nuestros espíritus también bailan en las malocas de baile de los animales[...]si la gente y el chamán no llena la cuya de coca y rapé en la maloca de baile de los animales, los animales no se reproducirían y multiplicarían. (117)

In this cosmogony we find a deeply rooted sense of unity of the beings inhabiting in the jungle, one gives oneself up to the others: only in this way life is possible. Association, correspondence, are experimented here in mythical terms. Dance and ritual consolidate relationships between species and the possible exchanges between them to keep life and the jungle going on.

We go back then to our question: does communication really exist in the jungle? Does a murmur circulate through it? We answer:

between species and beings living in the jungle there do not circulate letters, virtual messages, etc. The letter is not one of the speech's types. However, beings approach each other; they relate with each other, they give themselves up to the other beings to keep on living. Apparently, a silent communication happens in the jungle. Natural connections between the multitudes of sylvan inhabitants make up this type of communication which results in the evolution of life, the event of death³.

The hunger that the beast feels in front of its sleeping prey, or the magnificence of a fruit hanging in front of a bird seem examples of a language that allows correlation, associations between beings to allow life in the jungle to become possible. In that case, there would exist a communication through which “una vida equivale a otra vida” (Quiroga, 1984: 204), a natural language that ecological science tries to understand; “ecology treats of total interrelationships of organism and their environments” (Kroeber, 1994: 23).

2. ...And The Murmur Becomes Word

Somos nosotros quienes tenemos miedo...

—chilló a la sordina una arpía plomiza.

Horacio Quiroga

In the hypothesis raised at the beginning of this article, I asserted that the animals imagined by the narrator of *Cuentos de la Selva* have an “ecological speech”, whose words reveal nature. The jungle cheers its expressions up and, for the same reason, what is manifested in its dialogs is nothing else but what is happening in the forest, the river, the honeycomb. Each word presents the habitat; each phrase said by an animal is linked to that other communication that allows living beings to interact to survive. The words of the animals imagined by Quiroga make readable that murmur that is the movement, the becoming of the sylvan life. Hence for the reader, what the animals say will look strange, unusual, as if those using the words would not be speaking at all; in that sense Martha Canfield, talking about animals' dialogues on Quiroga's tales, asserts: “las cosas que se dicen entre ellos tienen que ver con la realidad inmediatamente percibida, con una memoria de corto alcance —y en esto más sensibles que el hombre— con ciertos fenómenos de percepción extrasensorial” (Canfield, 1990: 33).

Of course this language developed by the animals imagined by the story-world of Quiroga, somehow, must have a relation with the experience he had about the jungle; experience that, for Martha Canfield herself, was totally “authentic”; the jungle is for Horacio

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3 | It's important to understand, in this case, that the processes by which energy goes on in nature and in the jungle, are determined by a “natural vitality” (Kroeber, 1994: 51) that allows the case and the becoming of life and death as neither opposite nor isolated events but both integrated to constant evolution of the ecosystem.

Quiroga an “elaboración simbólica a partir de la experiencia real y como culminación de un viaje interior de purificación” (Canfield, 1990: 31). We will come back to this issue when concluding our reflection.

However, to listen to the murmur of the jungle installed in the words of the animals in *Cuentos de la selva* it is necessary to resort to their dialogues. If the sylvan sound is composed of infinite interrelations and contacts between the animals imagined by Quiroga, this sound is reproduced in what they assert, ask, and answer; in the tale “La Abeja Haragana” (1984), one of the characters, *the bee*, says: “- es cierto [...] No trabajo y yo no tengo la culpa” (Quiroga, 1984, 84). The snake, its interlocutor, answers: “Siendo así [...] voy a quitar del mundo a un mal bicho como tú. Te voy a comer abeja” (84).

This kind of dialogues, extremely tense between different species is repeated in most of the *Cuentos de la Selva*. In “Anaconda”, we have that the *cobra* speaks in these terms: “Y tú menos que nadie, porque me tienes miedo” (120). The *Anaconda* replies “¡Miedo yo!” (120). In the same way, in “El regreso de la Anaconda”, there is a dialogue between the *snakes* and the *anaconda*; this one says, “¡cuidado!” (145), to what the *snakes* reply, “¡entendido! [...] pero algún día te hemos de pedir cuenta de esto” (145). And the *anaconda* says again, “En otra época [...] rendí cuenta a alguna de ustedes...Y no quedé contenta. ¡Cuidado tú misma hermosa Yarará! Y ahora mucho ojo” (145). In “La Tortuga Gigante”, the *little mouse* says to the *turtle*: “¡Ah, zonza, zonza!, [...] ¡nunca vi una tortuga más zonza!” (11). And on another tale, “Las Medias de los Flamencos”, the *vipers* say: “¡No son medias! [...] ¡Sabemos lo que es! ¡Nos han engañado! ¡Los flamencos han matado a nuestras hermanas y se han puesto sus cueros como medias! ¡Las medias que tienen son víboras de coral!”(18). The narrator of this tale, after the dialogue, adds:

Al oír esto, los flamencos, llenos de miedo porque estaban descubiertos, quisieron volar; pero estaban tan cansados que no pudieron levantar una sola pata. Entonces las víboras de coral se lanzaron sobre ellos, y enroscándose en sus patas les deshicieron a mordiscones las medias. Les arrancaron las medias a pedazos, enfurecidas, y les mordían también las patas, para que murieran. (Quiroga, 1984: 19)

In those dialogues, rather than talking, the animal characters survive at the jungle. Verbal confrontations that happen between species merely reproduce the logic of interrelations among living beings, which, as you have seen, happen in an atmosphere of absolute tension; that tension, however, is what allows life to happen; that fertility, nourishment, energy and nutrients circulation be a fact. It is important to keep in mind here the Makuna cosmology, in which the other beings different to the human are seen as nourishment or as predators. This logic, however, is the one that allows the sylvan

ecosystem to preserve itself, I mean, to move, to be in a continuous metamorphosis. In this case, the words of the animals in the tales of Quiroga, reflect that deep and vital sylvan tension, through which approaches between different living beings happen. Animals attack, challenge, verbally illtreat each other (and physically as well), but all this must be assumed as the evolution of nature; a sylvan evolution in which the death of ones for the birth of the others is needed: “Although the risks may be exaggerated, dangerous creatures do inhabit these places, and tension, which puts a fine edge on your senses and makes you more aware of your environment, can be highly adaptive” (Miyata, Forsyth, 1995: 185).

So, what the words of the imagined animals reveal in Quiroga’s tales is nothing else than the jungle movement itself. Its metamorphosis is told and in the same sense do the transformation of energy, food circulation, the correspondence between all living beings and the so called “association” that allows them to live. All this conform the great murmur of the jungle, and it is in what the animals created by Quiroga say. It is true, there exists a harmony not pacific at all, but it is a kind of harmony typical of the jungle. According to Martul Tobío and Kathleen March, Quiroga is interested in “la relación de semejanza con el árbol, en ella se delata la presunción de una naturaleza que vive y crece unificadamente según una armonía sangrienta” (Tobío, March, 1987: 75). In this sense a snake, for example, tells the bee: “Con justicia o sin ella, te voy a comer” (Quiroga, 1984: 85).

In the same way, it is important to keep in mind that in the dialogues shown by Quiroga, all the animals participate. The ants intervene, “somos las hormigas, Anaconda, [...] y venimos a hacerte un reproche” (145). The toucans express, “nosotros no somos pájaros cualquiera [...]” (137). The horse says, “No importa [...] puedo darme por contento con este rico pasto” (197). The tiger, “ya estoy pronto, hermanos” (216), the snakes, the boas, etc. In the end, all of them can say the jungle; in other words, this means that all of them participate of this big tension and metamorphosis that have as scenario the forests, the rivers, among others. It is important to remember what Karl Kroeber says about it “[...]essential to this perspective is the recognition of each specific element of the whole, not as equal to every other but as equally necessary in its special fashion to integrity of the entire system”. (Kroeber, 1994: 56).

Precisely, this not-equality and therefore, the difference between the individuals that live in the jungle, is also stated by the words of the animal-characters. Each animal, when talking, recognizes itself as unique, with its own and one and only characteristics that no other specie owns. The Anaconda, for example, sticks out its individuality and its physical traits by saying “Cuando un ser es bien formado,

ágil, fuerte, veloz, se apodera de su enemigo con la energía de nervios y músculos que constituye su honor” (Quiroga, 1984: 119). The word, in this case, helps the animals describe physical traits that each one owns and that are essential for their integration, through them, to the totality of the ecosystem. “[...] the (quite literally) infinite worth of each unique life, however small, insignificant, or humble depended not on its being equal to others but, instead, on its making a peculiar contribution to the wholeness of an entire system of vitality, a wholeness constituted by almost endless differences of diversely individualized beings.” (Kroeber, 1994: 57).

3. Conclusion: the Jungle is the House of the Word

La casa, motivo de preocupación en la selva, habíase convertido en establecimiento científico.

Horacio Quiroga.

In this way, as it has been suggested, words told by the animals in *Cuentos de la Selva* reassert what happens in nature. Between what is said and the jungle there is an indissoluble, poetic nexus. The murmur of life that happens in the branches and in the roots of a big tree is dialogue in the tales of Horacio Quiroga.

But not everything ends here. Precisely, the jungle being told is what makes Quiroga’s tales fascinating; in front of this fact we wonder: what has happened with his language, with his way of narrating, with his words? what events has he suffered as a writer for his language being capable to reveal the nature? To try to answer this, we must remember what Misiones meant to the author.

Misiones⁴, is the sylvan place where the author lived for a long time. But, more than that, is as well the space where Quiroga finds the jungle and, therefore, the territory where he invents a language that is not the one of the city or of the so called “civilization”. Misiones is a state of the soul for Quiroga; there, as Martha Candfield said, the writer purifies himself from the city progress, he gets purged of the artistic clichés, and becomes himself in another one: the one who listens to the jungle’s murmur and writes it down. In the borders of Western reason, his language gets transformed; it starts to correspond with the tree, the tiger, and the sound of the sylvan evolution. Not in vain Noe Jitrick, talking about Quiroga, asserts: “por de pronto, adquirirá un aspecto más duro y selvático, empezará a crecer el mito de su hurañía, de su capacidad de desapegarse de los halagos y las vanidades urbanas” (Jitrick, 1967: 21).

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4 | As can be contrasted with any biography of Quiroga, Misiones was the jungle place where the author lived, and which determined his world vision as much as his works. Quiroga lived for a long period in Iviraromí, border area between Uruguay, his country, and Argentina. It is important to remember that Quiroga discovered the jungle in a photographic expedition to San Ignacio ruins, together with Leopoldo Lugones, in 1901.

In this way, both in Quiroga's life and writing, a strong criticism to Western culture is set; the writer runs away from it and travels toward "the barbarian"; gives up order, accommodation and installs himself at Misiones, where he will start his work: "reconocido buscador de las márgenes, pareciera ser que desde la libertad de las fronteras le fue posible emprender obras "de todos los colores" (Fleming, 1995: 106).

Then, the appreciation we must do of Quiroga must point out to recognizing his enormous effort for creating an American sylvan language, in an age where most of the writers aspired to simulate in a proper way literary trends coming from Europe. That is why it is said about Quiroga, that he "se ponía en las antípodas de D.F. Sarmiento". (Canfield, 1990: 31).

This being positioned at the antipodes it nothing else than making the jungle the house of word; making of narration the place of tigers and water. To create, as Victor Fuenmayor says, "la analogía esencial" (Fuenmayor, 1998: 9) between the body, the writing, and nature. This would be, in the end, the "Quiroguian" meaning of America.

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