

The Social Function of Art. A Comparative Study of the Tale "El Canto de la Cigarra" ("The Song of the Cicada") by Onelio Jorge Cardoso and the Aesop Fable, "The Ants and the Grasshopper"*

[English version]

La función social del arte. Estudio comparativo del cuento «El canto de la cigarra» de Onelio Jorge Cardoso y del mito «La cigarra y las hormigas» de Esopo

A função social da arte. Estudo comparativo entre o conto "O canto da cigarra" de Onélio Jorge Cardoso e o mito "A cigarra e as formigas" de Esopo

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Abstract

Objective: To highlight the power of art to transform an individual's ethical behavior and support them in their struggle against unjust power, through the study of the story "El Canto De La Cigarra" ("The Song of the Cicada") by Cuban author Onelio Jorge Cardoso (1914-1986) and the fable "The Ants and the Grasshopper" by the Greek fabulist Aesop (6th

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century B.C.). **Methodology:** The starting point was a historical journey through Platonic, Pythagorean, Aristotelian, and Cynic philosophy, as well as the philosophy of the German philosopher Schopenhauer, regarding the ability of art to mitigate humanity's pain and appease its passions. Emphasizing that in the story "The Song of the Cicada," the Cuban writer emphasizes the relationship between art and power and illustrates the creation of a healthy and constructive society through aesthetic cultivation, a comparative study was conducted of this story with the fable "The Ants and the Grasshopper" by Aesop. Both authors use the world of animals as a microcosm of the human community. **Results:** The social importance of the artist and their work was demonstrated. Although not immediately evident, the usefulness of this importance can lead to the moral improvement of the entire community, fostering a solidary and anti-dogmatic future. **Conclusions:** Through the allegorical paradigm of the animal community, it becomes clear that art introduces perfection and ethical beauty into society. Hence, in a world in full social crisis, the artist, through his work, manages to topple the powerful from their thrones, exalting the most humiliated and creating an ideal world.

Keywords: art; fable; society; power; injustice.

Resumen

Objetivo: resaltar la fuerza del arte para transformar la conducta ética del individuo y apoyarlo en su lucha contra el poder injusto, a través del estudio del cuento «El canto de la cigarra» del autor cubano Onelio Jorge Cardoso (1914-1986) y de la fábula «La cigarra y las hormigas» del fabulista griego Esopo (siglo VI a. C.). **Metodología:** se partió de un recorrido histórico por la filosofía platónica, pitagórica, aristotélica cínica y la del filósofo alemán Schopenhauer, sobre la trascendencia del arte para mitigar el dolor del hombre y apaciguar sus pasiones. Con la finalidad de recalcar que en el cuento «El canto de la cigarra» el escritor cubano hace hincapié en la relación del arte con el poder y exhibe la creación de una sociedad sana y constructiva a través del cultivo estético, se realizó un estudio comparativo de dicho cuento con la Fábula «La cigarra y las hormigas» de Esopo ya que ambos autores utilizan el mundo de los animales como microcosmos de la comunidad humana. **Resultados:** se demostró la importancia social del artista y de su obra cuya utilidad, aunque no sea evidente de inmediato, puede conducir al perfeccionamiento moral de toda la colectividad construyendo un futuro solidario y antidogmático. **Conclusiones:** a través del paradigma alegórico de la comunidad de los animales se hace claro que el arte introduce la perfección y la belleza ética en la sociedad.

De ahí que, en un mundo en plena crisis social, el artista con su obra logre derribar del trono a los poderosos enalteciendo a los más humillados y creando un mundo ideal.

Palabras clave: arte; mito; sociedad; poder; injusticia.

Resumo

Objetivo: evidenciar o poder da arte para transformar a conduta ética do indivíduo e apoiá-lo na sua luta contra o poder injusto, através do estudo do conto "O canto da cigarra" do escritor cubano Onelio Jorge Cardoso (1914-1986) e da fábula "A cigarra e as formigas" do fabulista grego Esopo (séc. VI a.C.). **Metodologia:** o ponto de partida foi um percurso histórico pela filosofia platónica, pitagórica, aristotélica, cínica e do filósofo alemão Schopenhauer, sobre a transcendência da arte para mitigar a dor do homem e apaziguar as suas paixões. Para salientar que no conto "O Canto da Cigarra" o escritor cubano enfatiza a relação entre a arte e o poder e mostra a criação de uma sociedade sã e construtiva através do cultivo estético, foi efetuado um estudo comparativo deste conto com a fábula "A Cigarra e as Formigas" de Esopo, uma vez que ambos os autores utilizam o mundo dos animais como microcosmo da comunidade humana. **Resultados:** foi demonstrada a importância social do artista e da sua obra, cuja utilidade, embora não seja imediatamente evidente, pode conduzir à melhoria moral de toda a comunidade, construindo um futuro de solidariedade e antidogmatismo. **Conclusões:** através do paradigma alegórico da comunidade dos animais, torna-se claro que a arte introduz a perfeição e a beleza ética na sociedade. Assim, num mundo em plena crise social, o artista com a sua obra consegue derrubar os poderosos do seu trono, exaltando os mais humilhados e criando um mundo ideal.

Palavras-chave: arte; mito; sociedade; poder; injustiça.

Art and Its Social Function

The cicada and its association with art can be traced back to antiquity, in Aesop's fables (6th century B.C.). In recent times, Onelio Jorge Cardoso—a Cuban writer who lived from 1914 to 1986—was concerned with the social function of art and the artist. He also used the song of the cicada and its symbolism as a means of escaping the harsh reality of his time, convinced of its ideological dimension. As such, the role of the artist is not limited to entertainment and amusement but to serving as an instrument for the education and awareness of its recipient regarding the problems “of the spatial-temporal reality in which they live” (Pandis Pavlakis, 2015, p. 163). The aim of the present article, through a comparative study, is to highlight the theme of the power of art to transform the behavior of the individual and to support them in their struggle against unjust power.

The cicada that appears as the protagonist, both in Onelio Jorge Cardoso's story and in Aesop's myth, is also found in Plato's *Phaedrus* (1970). There, Plato presents Socrates conversing with another man, a lover of the Muses, to whom he reveals a legend about the origin of the cicadas and his mission of informing the Muses about who pays homage to them.

It is said that these little animals were once men that existed before the Muses were born. When the Muses were born and singing appeared, some of them were so transported with pleasure that, singing, they neglected to eat and drink and died without noticing it. From these was born later the race of the cicadas that received the ability to go without food as a gift from the Muses. They sing from the moment they are born until they die, without eating or drinking. After their death, they go to notify which of the people of this world they pay homage to. [...] But it is to the eldest, Calliope, and to Urania, the next oldest, that they give notice of those who spend their lives devoted to philosophy and cultivate the kind of music over which they preside. And these, precisely, being among the Muses, those who deal with heaven and with divine and human discourses, are the ones who emit the most beautiful voice. (259 b-c, 259d).

In these statements, emphasis is placed on the fact that, thanks to this metamorphosis, those men turned into cicadas “only to the song they were born” (Luque 37) received the privilege of singing without ever ceasing, thus defeating death itself. In addition, Pythagorean philosophy is highlighted here by referring to Urania, the Muse of astronomy. Therefore, from a cosmological explanation, even music could reveal “the harmonic structure of the universe” (Garcia, 2013, p. 23). The above explains the presence of this artist creature both in Onelio Jorge

Cardoso's tale and in Aesop's fable, and justifies its supposed frivolity, laziness, and aversion to work.

Other Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras and Aristotle, have granted special importance to art, and more specifically, to music (Garcia, 2013, pp. 15-21) and its extraordinary power to please men and mitigate the pain of the sorrowful (Garcia, 2013, pp. 15-21; Tatarkiewicz, 2000, pp. 15-190). Precisely, for the Pythagoreans, music expressed the harmony of numbers and of the cosmos, which was reduced to melodic numbers that provided “all the intelligible and sensible fullness of being.” For them, music served as a mediator between the human being and God (Rojas, 2005, pp. 1, 37 and 83). In this regard, the German philosopher Schopenhauer (2005) saw art as a liberating force to free one from pain.

In “The Song of the Cicada” (1962), Jorge Cardoso uses the animal world as a microcosm of the human community, just as the cynics who speak of “a humanized animality that, wise by nature [...], shows teachings, behaviors” (Flores, 2015, pp. 3-4). In this world, animals and insects coexist in harmony. There are the industrious bees, the crickets, the little parrot, the malevolent toad, the mayor—or the beetle—with its fat, difficult to move body, powerful but unhappy, and the cicada, the agile artist who possesses the gift of music. All, except the head of the executive branch of the community, are characterized by a natural wisdom.

The story highlights the importance and social necessity of art, whose value is not just recognized by those who are moved by dark and petty feelings. In this particular story, the beetle, jealous of the merit of others, cannot stand the artistic prowess of his antagonist, the cicada. Thus, considering art as a useless and unproductive craft, he continues to spend his time and energy defaming and disqualifying it to eliminate its seduction (Pavlakis, 1996, pp. 48-49). And, although some ardent defenders of the cicada appear, such as the crickets, the firefly, the little parrot, and the bee—the insect “emblem of work and obedience” (Cirlot, 2006, p. 63)—the mayor persists in his idea, as seen in the following dialogue:

The crickets, who are very good musicians, praised the cicada very much [...] It croons and entertains, do you suggest, dear Mayor —replied the same bee; yet I will not deny that the melody resides within the breadth of the wind and reaches out all around [...] Just then, a tiny parrot [...] chirped: [...] Only yesterday while raising my hand to chastise one of my kids, the melodic tune of our fellow, the cicada, danced into my ears. There, my hand suspended and remained in the middle of the air, unable to be lowered [...] Within her melody lies a magic that mends a woman's heart. “Oh, indeed, something paralyzing,” teased the mayor. “Be it paralyzing or otherwise [...] the point is: my hand did not descend upon

my child." Ah, well, no matter! I inquire if equity resides in our collective toil while she remains at rest. "Her job is crooning, dear Mayor," uttered a beautiful cold-light firefly [...] "Let her articulate the rationale behind her idleness; let her unveil her guilt." [...] "I," the cicada began calmly, "was born for crooning, and if that is my fault, fault it is not mine to bear". (Cardoso, 1975, pp. 483-485).

These utterances emphasize the boundaries separating the two characters. On the one hand, there is the cicada, the diligent artist who opts to devote her life solely to her craft. On the other hand, there is the mayor, a stark juxtaposition to the cicada, who derisively considers that the cicada's melody is noxious or "paralyzing." This underscores his philosophical skepticism as he posits that the music's force is merely illusory, briefly diverting the listener's focus while lulling them toward a state of "laziness, drunkenness and ruin." Additionally, upon the cessation of the music "the unhealed mind falls back into feelings of anger, apprehension and sorrow" (Tatarkiewicz, 2000, p. 191). This segment certainly captures the author's perspective, esteeming the artistry of the cicada, which, in this case, resembles the artist and unquestionably deems him "essential, constructive, and enlightening toward the suitable development of a robust society" (Pavlakis, 1996, p. 49). Thus, underscoring the music's value and influence on the soul because it manages to build "the disturbed harmony of the individuals' spirit" again (Montero, 1989, p. 51). As it happens with the tiny parrot who, thanks to the effect of singing, is calmed down and prevented from chastising her child (Pavlakis, 1996, pp. 48-49).

Similarly, the disciples of Pythagoras resorted to medicine for the purification of the body and to music for the soul (Tatarkiewicz, 2000, p.89). Music, in this situation, leads to catharsis through musical healing. Based on Aristotle, what is associated with "purification of the emotions" is rather a restoration, a mental and physiological unburdening toward emotional harmony (Amigo, 2014, p.472). In particular, in his *Politics*, Aristotle claims that through music individuals change their behavior as a result of the arising strong emotions, allowing them to take the lead in the development of an ideal city (García Peña, 2013, p. 34). Thus, through the prism of Aristotelian philosophy, musical practice has various benefits (Aristotle, 1994 [*Pol.*], 1352a¹).

In this realm, the beetle-mayor, enchanted by envy —that "minuscule obscure seed which, should it find haven within the heart's chambers and elude timely eviction, develops and grows until the tainting heart" (Cardoso, 1975, p. 483)— finds that he is incapable of grasping the cicada's artistic essence. As evident in the following excerpt imbued with Cardoso's wit, the mayor exploits his political dominion to incarcerate and chastise the cicada deeming it guilty of crooning without working.

"Oh, dear Mayor, what an earache I have!" lamented a pretty butterfly. That's the Eustachian tube [...] an instrument [...] susceptible to discordant harmonies. [...] -So is blame to be pinned on her, the cicada? [...] The cicada forever croons to demise! [...] So much so that some time later, nearly all of them, covering it up, left to evade the cicada's melody. Upon a morning's arrival [...] the mayor and his four tiny worms with their weapons, descended upon the abode of the cicada: -Submit yourself, youth, in the name [...] of the "Law of the ears". Needless to recount, that very night and no other, the young cicada's window blazed with light. And that's how most of the winter went. The people were not listening to the melody, and their palms descending sternly upon their children's bottoms, who were crying their eyes out and could not understand the cause of their chastisement. (Cardoso, 1975, pp. 485-487).

The preceding dialogue exemplifies that in a society characterized by the absence of democratic justice, the law of the strongest prevails. Consequently, the mayor ultimately achieved the tarnishing of the artist's reputation and her subsequent imprisonment, aided "by four tiny worms." The selection of this animal is not a matter of chance; as per Cirlot (2006), the worm, owing to its innate inferiority and subterranean existence —akin to that of a snake— represents "an example of the slithering and convoluted force [...] it bestows death instead of life." In this context, the worm symbolizes the demise of the superior entity (p. 239). Henceforth, within the realm of creatures, a sense of both material and spiritual dearth is accentuated by the artist's departure. The imperious need of her art, whose societal role intervenes "the aesthetic with the ethical and the pedagogical amplifies" (García, 2013, p. 34).

Nonetheless, the vice of ingratitude is chastised through an incident that alters the circumstances: the arrival of a toad, a malevolent creature,¹ who demands maintenance and threatens to destroy the community if denied. The urgency of the situation compels individuals to regard the strength of the cicada's craft as the most effective weapon against the imminent danger of the toad, and thus "the creatures themselves [...] offer mankind the tenets" (Reyes, 1965, p. 74) of wisdom. The mayor's facade of deceit is unveiled at this moment, He stands feeble and craven when facing the toad's threats, prepared to barter away his honor to preserve his position of power, as demonstrated in the following dialogue:

"Sir, how might we be at your service, Your Excellency?"

"In diverse and nourishing food," replied the toad.

3 "Whose mission encompasses none but the shattering of the astral light" (Cirlot, 2006, pp. 262-400).

"An action must be taken swiftly," the mayor exclaimed nervously.

"You possess no duty!"

"I am the mayor, right?"

"It was [...] because since he called that beast excellence, it ceased to be so for us."

"Brothers, the cicada [...] Its music makes people better, it paralyzes the enemy. [...] as the tiny bee opened the door of the cicada's cell [...] she was writing on a lined paper."

"Sister, today we crave your melody as never before! [...] Let us proceed," the cicada uttered with simplicity, grasping her violin. [...] Slowly, a fine melody was ascending from the village, emanating from the cicada's window [...] At first, the huge beast began to smile mockingly, as time progresses his body was motionless, and eventually, akin to two huge, corrugated awnings, his eyelids descended. Subsequently, the villagers forsook their hiding spots, circled behind the hill, and embarked on their labor with heightened determination, undermining the earth, until, with one voice, they all turned away, and the earth gave way. The toad fell backwards, rolling into the abyss and his demise consummated. (Cardoso, 1975, pp 488-491).

These utterances reveal, on the one hand, the artist's magnanimity, her absence of bitterness, and her defiance against malevolence through her music, the sole weapon against oppressive power. On the other hand, the real and mixed personality of the mayor, whose power collapses; "what's not good can't last long" (Cardoso, 1975, p. 488). Thus, after the salvation of the people, everyone ended up recognizing the value of the artist and his task, respected and essential in every society. Their melodies expressed themselves universally "more secret life, desires, sufferings and joys, the flow and reflux of the heart" of the community (Schopenhauer, 2005). After a few years the grasshopper died, but no one forgot it. Its art was immortalized; it is not art but the artist who dies.

"The Grasshopper and the Ants" tells the story of two antagonistic animals. It is perhaps Aesop's most famous fable even though it is barely two paragraphs long. The lazy grasshopper lover of music and parties, singing all day long, completely forgets the coming winter, while the hard-working and sensible ants only gather food, wheat grains for the winter. Once winter arrives, the hungry and half-dead grasshopper asks for food from the ruthless ants, they let it die and even mock it:

In winter ants dried wet grain. A hungry grasshopper asked them for food.

The ants said: "Why didn't you store any food during the summer?"

It said: "I didn't laze, but rather sang melodiously."

They laughed and said: "So if you sang in the summer, now dance." (García, 1993, p. 154).

This dialogue contains the cruelty of the powerful being, the rich, toward the weaker who asks for help. The characters in Aesop's fables are almost always animals. There is a skeptical view and harsh perspective of power and strong attacks against powerful "animal that abuses its strength" (Rodríguez, 1986, p. 22). This view coincides with cynical philosophy, as a systematic denunciation of the old social order and traditional values (Rod, 1986, p. 22).

On this basis, it can be deduced that the grasshopper, the protagonist of both stories, faithful to the cynical philosophy, is the embodiment of joy. It shows anti-conventionalism and highlights the value of nature and fights against all vanity. The conflict between nature and power is taken to the extreme (Villalobos, 2009, pp. 15, 18 and 26). The two grasshoppers carry all the goods with them without seeking the unnatural social principles; such as the vain appearance of power, wealth or glory (Martín & Zamora, 2018, p. 7), and none of them "desire great things. They accept death after a life that seeks to be pleasant but simple" (Rodríguez, 1986, pp. 23, 25 and 26). Aesop uses these symbolic stereotypes to "morally teach the reader" (Cuesta, 2009, pp. 152-153) and he does not hesitate in placing man at the level of the animal, in continuous struggle for survival (Matic, 2015, p. 158). Cardoso fights against "the arduous and anchored moral order" to build a world with humanity's full realization (Doncel, 2007, p. 419), without the cruel repression of the powerful.

From all the above, the discourse of the Cardosian tale, through the presentation of scenes of daily life of a community of animals, offers messages of a didactic nature, related to the role of art and the artist in human society. Similarly, Aesop, in the fable "The Grasshopper and the Ants," personifies animals to convey a moralizing message, associating the grasshopper with song and art.

Both the Greek fabulist and Cardoso expose an approach to the conflict between the two animals, they leave the possibility of the choice of conduct, always according to the principle of free will and its value (García, 1993, p. 5). According to the narrative theory of Bal (1990), the characters in a work are not necessarily human, therefore, personified and speaking animals are presented. They bear characteristics attributed by the author; the animal receive a symbolic

value, and its anthropomorphic appearance is presented with human qualities and defects. In Aesop's fable there is a conflict between the grasshopper, the loafer that chooses the artistic world without material concerns and is punished for frivolity; and the cruel, powerful and rich ants for storing food and choosing hard work to survive. In Cardoso's story, the two antagonists are the grasshopper (the artist that sweetens the trials of life) and the beetle (the evil mayor able of all sorts of wick), each with its position on the scale of values (García, 1993, p. 5).

In general, both authors tell their stories between time-spatial accuracy and vagueness, and their characters are human types who live in a timeless and constant place; behavior patterns and actions that could happen in different places and times are achieved. García (1993) states that:

In the allegorical mirror of the animal world, a tough society is reflected, in a constant struggle for survival. Despite its apparent non-historicity, with its reference to beings guided by their natural senses, this conception of the animal universe as a competitive and ruthless society leaves an unavoidable historical background to be felt. (p. 6).

The story is developed within a fixed and unchangeable "nature of animals" (Martín & Zamora, 2018, p. 8) in a *locus amoenus*, a figurative place, synonymous with a paradise that enjoys life, *carpe diem*. García (1993) through the scene of a fantastic animal world, states allegorically the moral of a tale to the real world. In both stories, the speaking animal characters do not try to avoid reality, but they signify a meditation on the world of humans. In this microcosm, animals with their *logos* capacity, i.e. "reason and word," state that: "The world is like this; as merciless and pragmatic as the one reflected in these incredible images" (García, 1993, p. 4).

In Aesop's fable, an "austere style" and "ascetic simplicity" are noted. From this simplicity of telling all the accessory is removed and the essence of narrative is better captured, without "historical costumes" or decorations (García, 1993, p. 4). Despite the fact that sometimes comic traits are attributed to the animals by the satirical and realistic nature of the myth, they are not allowed to move away from the cruelty of life, from other animals or from humankind in constant struggle, "some to impose their power and others to avoid being subjected to it" (Montaner, 2013, p. 184). Cardoso always chooses to write a simple, almost schematic way to manage the conflicts of the characters (Bueno, 1963, p. 450). The stories also mix the serious and the funny, humor and truth, the tragic and the comic, to teach and attack at the same time; to "avoid mocking the errors of the soul" (Villalobos, 2009, p. 36). Since it aspires to entertain, as well as denounce

the evils affecting people and proposes the creation of a better society through the modification of human behavior.

Although Aesop's fable presents the defense of the weak against the strong and powerful animal, although naive and, most of the time, "the small triumphing over the great" (Rodríguez, 1986, p. 22). This particular fable does not have a happy ending, as the artist dies in winter due to cold and starvation. It aroused much criticism from intellectuals who considered this fable an example of selfishness and inhumanity. Perhaps for this reason, in other versions of "The Ant and the Grasshopper," by different authors it turns out that the ants change their attitude and take pity on the lazy singer, giving her shelter and food; the artist, for her part, offers them good music that sweetens their hard life (García, 1993, p.9). Speaking of this fable, Rousseau criticizes the morality that emerges from it, for corrupting young people, showing that the winners in life are the strongest (García, 1993, p. 5): "The most hateful of all monsters would be a greedy and tough child who knew what was asked of him and what he denied. The ant does even more, she teaches him to mock his refusals" (Rousseau, 1990, p. 144).

At this point lies the great difference between this fable and Jorge Cardoso's story that has modified Aesop's original tale and its moral by presenting a new version with "a conscious desire to correct the original sense, [which] is a very repeated process in literary history" (García, 1993, p. 9). In the Cardosoian tale, art manages to knock down the powerful from their thrones, exalting the weakest and most humiliated, which shows an ideal and righteous world where art, according to Schopenhauer (2005), makes the true essence of the world being discovered by using their own language, unknown by reason.

These two great authors wrote immortal narratives successfully, each in his own time and social context. Indeed, the artistic quality and universality of the work of Onelio Jorge Cardoso is evident. In the words of García (2013), the ideas that emerge from his texts:

Can serve as an incentive to be a little better, and help build a supportive, anti-dogmatic, collectivist future, where prejudices and taboos, selfishness, misunderstandings and hypocrisies are banished, and where culture makes a discouraging function of the individual and the community. (p. 87).

In the same way, Aesop shows universal values and norms of behavior and, with his acute observation, presents the vices and virtues of men in an accurate and ironic way. Likewise, he has served as a source of inspiration for several authors during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, among which the French writer Jean de La Fontaine and the Spanish Félix María de Samaniego stand out (García, 1993, p. 16).

In “The Song of the Cicada” by Cardoso, there is a protest against the powerful villain, his punishment and the superior value of artistic talent and kindness, features of the cicada in front of the ruler. Thus, the Cuban author undertakes the defense of the value of the artist and his work, whose first and most universal purpose is to serve the moral improvement of all and make them better, although the usefulness of his task is not immediately evident (Hernández, 1985, p. 95). In this way, art is identified as “a very particular socio-cultural attitude and not the palliative of human misery” (Prada, 1988, p. 142) that helps the spirit to open the doors to save itself from the suffocation of the world (Prada, 1988, p. 38) introducing into society “perfection and beauty” (Prada, 1988, p. 142). For this reason, in the story, the community of animals realizes that they need art to refine their sensitivity and enjoy emotion and feelings in a world exempted from the abuse of power, the origin of all evils. In Aesop’s fable, “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” at a time in full social crisis or decadence of cultural values, a lesson in inhumanity is given (Rousseau, 1990) against the artist and his talent, who falls victim to the insensitivity of the most powerful and is sentenced to death, without scruples, by those who do not understand the true value of art which, according to Schopenhauer, constitutes the quintessence of life and could be “one of the possible solutions to the ‘misery of the world’” (Rodríguez, 2011, p. 95).

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