

Introduction:

“To burn like this without surcease . . .”

Carlos J. Alonso

“The worst of it,” Oliveira said to himself, “is that I want to be an active onlooker and that’s where the trouble starts.”

Julio Cortázar, Hopscotch

Just before his death in 1984, Julio Cortázar left two books ready for publication: a volume entitled *Salvo el crepúsculo* containing poems that had never made it into print before, and another comprised of two previously unpublished one-act plays: *Nada a Pehuajo* and *Adiós Robinson*. Subsequent to his passing Cortázar’s legal heirs have released three other books to press: *El examen* and *Divertimento* (both published in 1986) and *Diario de Andrés Fava* (1995), all of them written during the years before Cortázar had achieved literary prominence. The effect of this abundant posthumous production has been to make the sort of closure one would have expected to accompany the author’s death difficult to achieve. But the release of a number of works produced by Cortázar at the beginning of his literary career in the late forties and early fifties is especially threatening, in that it points to the possibility of an endless regression of the originary moment of writing – that avowed fountainhead required for any attempt to arrive at a genetic understanding of a writer’s oeuvre. From this perspective, the body of texts that we customarily subsume under the rubric “Cortázar” appears to be an opus still under construction even after the stark finality of his physical demise.

On the other hand, “Cortázar” the author-function is as much the product of a way of reading that body of works as it is the totality composed by them, however unstable the latter may be. Indeed, one of the concepts underlying this anthology of essays on Cortázar’s oeuvre is that the changes which have occurred in critical discourse during the last fifteen or twenty years have produced a different “Cortázar,” whose contours begin to reveal themselves under the cumulative pressure of the critical approaches brought together in this volume. That conviction is

reflected in the titles assigned the four parts into which the book is divided, all of which propose the activity of reading as the controlling and configuring operation.

There is a canonical image of Cortázar, a critical creation that has emerged from the accumulation of numerous acts of interpretation plied on his works and of countless scraps of biographical lore. This picture – which is also a plot of sorts – reads in its essential rendition something like this: Cortázar was a giant of a man (six feet four) who abandoned his native Argentina in his thirties for a life of permanent and voluntary exile in Paris. In his adulthood he suffered from a disease that, in Dorian Grayesque fashion, made him look substantially younger than he was. His stories – where his literary excellence truly resides according to this *récit* – are structured on the motif of the existence of two simultaneous orders that at privileged and unplanned moments touch one another in a way that allows for passage from one order to the other, leading to a reversal of the hierarchy that originally defined them. As a collection, Cortázar's stories are lighter, more playful versions of Borges's narratives. His novels, on the other hand, favor formal experimentation, are characterized by fragmentation and the incorporation of minimalia – press clippings, *faits divers*, and so on – and are imbued with an aesthetics that has more or less vague surrealist undertones. Cortázar was from the outset a strong supporter of the Cuban Revolution, but the Cuban bureaucracy's attempt to regulate artistic production (which culminated in the so-called Padilla affair) created a rift that never healed completely: In a series of articles and open letters he defended the possibility of engaging in revolutionary activity within the realm of the literary rather than in the political arena. His social commitment was rekindled by the Sandinista experiment in Nicaragua, which motivated Cortázar's late "conversion" or return to political engagement. Toward the end of his career, his works made increasing use of popular cultural forms, marking a turn in his production toward the recognition of "low" discourses as aesthetically viable vehicles.

In a number of ways, this collection of essays on Cortázar positions itself against the background provided by this received and well-established notion of the Argentine writer and his works. Its aim is to exploit the opportunity created by the two circumstances previously described: that is, the seeming open-endedness of Cortázar's oeuvre above and beyond his death, and the profound changes that have taken place in the critical scene in the last two decades. These essays, written by some of the most perspicacious and intelligent scholars in the field, offer

a wide range of responses to the question of how Cortázar's relevance may be renegotiated from our critical present. Each contributor has managed to find a point of leverage for a reconsideration of Cortázar's oeuvre that ultimately calls into question the usefulness and accuracy of the conception of his works that we have inherited.

Part 1, "Reading Cortázar Today," groups essays in which the principal thrust lies in taking critical advantage of the chasm that has opened between a Cortázar that was and the one configured by a contemporary critical optics. They are guided by a desire to reframe Cortázar in order to shed light on aspects of his work that become noticeable only in a retrospective critical examination. For these critics, "Cortázar" is a fairly homogeneous textual entity whose ideological and literary underpinnings become clear when it is filtered through the interpretive interrogations put to it by the present critical moment.

In "Between Utopia and Inferno (Julio Cortázar's Version)," Ana María Amar Sánchez begins by posing the very question this anthology addresses: How indeed can one read Cortázar today? Her answer is to produce a novel reading of the Argentine author by placing him in the interpretive context of that long tradition of works which have sought to construct the entity referred to as Latin America. Amar Sánchez argues that the movement between binaries that is the typical situation depicted by Cortázar's stories serves to expose the fundamental contradiction at the heart of this textual tradition, one in which the encounter with Latin American essence is customarily represented as a displacement in time and/or space from a state of inauthenticity to one of plenitude that, paradoxically, becomes progressively more problematic as the protagonist draws closer to his avowed goal. Amar Sánchez sees in the structure of Cortázar's short stories, and especially in "Axolotl" and "Night Upside Down" (*La noche boca arriba*), a critique of that tradition – a critical positioning that makes visible a contestatory relationship between Cortázar and Spanish American literature in general which affords new insights regarding his place in that literary continuum.

Jean Franco's "Comic Stripping: Cortázar in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is a powerful meditation on Cortázar's place in the high-low culture divide in Latin America. Franco examines texts written by Cortázar in the early 1950s such as "The Gates of Heaven" ("Puertas al cielo") and the posthumously released *El examen*, a time in which Peronista populism had created mass movements that threatened bourgeois stability and norms. Franco sees in these early works a strategy that constitutes a response to this crisis, and that goes on to become a constant in

Cortázar's literary production: the postulation of an us–them division that is, in reality, the answer to the collapse of aesthetic value as an intrinsic quality of the art object and its replacement by a sense of taste that is an individual's subjective creation – namely, the sort of personal intervention that can create and valorize the most daring conjunctions of the popular and the classical. In this fashion, value becomes a function of a specific kind of consumption rather than an “objective,” and therefore historically threatened, quality. Those individuals “in the know” then band together to form the various clubs (“La Serpiente,” “La Joda,” for instance) that reappear in Cortázar's works. Franco argues convincingly that this strategy is still at work even in later texts such as *Fantomas against the Multinational Vampires* (*Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales*), in which Cortázar appears to be relying heavily on elements of a mass aesthetics.

Neil Larsen's “Cortázar and Postmodernity: New Interpretive Liabilities” endeavors to describe and explain the experience of rereading Cortázar's *Hopscotch* from our postmodern vantage point. Larsen proposes that there is an eminently dated air to the novel that can be ascribed, first, to some of its formal and thematic qualities such as its conceptions of gender and its experimentation with form. But the core of the novel's archaism lies, according to him, in the changes that have occurred in what he calls the “ideology of reading” during the intervening thirty years. Larsen uses the various polemics in which Cortázar engaged concerning the question of the local versus the universal as it pertained to a political praxis for the Latin American author to explain Cortázar's caducity, but also to effect a critique of the ethnographically based critical localism that has finally gained the upper hand at the expense of a “universalist” Cortázar. His reading provides a firm historical foundation for the experience of reading Cortázar nowadays while simultaneously questioning the ideological investments of the background against which that complacent reading takes place. Hence Cortázar's “caducity” here functions as a paradigmatic instance that allows Larsen to expose the ideological underpinnings of contemporary Spanish American cultural criticism.

René Prieto engages in a classic psychoanalytic interpretation of Cortázar's short stories in “Cortázar's Closet.” He skillfully assembles a catalogue of instances throughout Cortázar's short fiction in which characters are described as emerging from an enclosed space into a light-filled and threatening environment in which some version of death awaits. Prieto argues that this master story is fueled by an anxiety harking

back to the violent separation from the mother that defines birth – what Freudian psychoanalysis refers to as “the wound that never heals.” The desire to assuage that anxiety produces the repetitive appearance in Cortázar’s work of motifs that are allusive to the birth situation: darkness, holes, tunnels, and experiences of suffocation, shortness of breath, and drowning. Out of this narrative crucible that typically signifies death for his characters, Cortázar manages, on the other hand, to abreact creatively his separation anxiety by means of the symbolic substitutions that Prieto carefully traces in his short fiction.

The part entitled “Cortázar Reads Cortázar,” brings together contributions in which the schism that the essays in the previous section saw as a function of the difference between Cortázar’s texts and the contemporary critical scene is projected instead onto Cortázar’s oeuvre itself. All of the articles gathered here argue for the existence of a disjunction within Cortázar which they refigure metaphorically as a rereading and rewriting of Cortázar’s previous work by himself. “Cortázar” here functions as a way to give a name and a location to that place in which reversals, contradictions, and fissures appear among the various strands that weave his texts, or between different moments of his literary production.

“Between Reading and Repetition (apropos of Cortázar’s *62: A Model Kit*)” by Lucille Kerr considers the implications of the several statements on the poetics of the novel that appear frequently in Cortázar’s works. Specifically, she addresses the relationship between *62: A Model Kit* (*62: modelo para armar*) and the pronouncements on the genre that are ascribed to the character Morelli in the text of Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*. According to Kerr, there is an inescapable difficulty in the sort of theory-praxis connection that the prologue to *62: A Model Kit* establishes between the proposal for a new novel included in chapter 62 of *Hopscotch* and the novel that it introduces; for one of the explicit intentions of *Hopscotch* is to collapse the distinction between the novel and the poetics of the novel. She proceeds to perform a close reading of the opening pages of *62* that sees in them the introjection into the text of the reader’s activity – of a technique for reading that thereby recuperates the author’s regulatory role in the interpretive operation. This allows her to posit the existence in Cortázar of an inherently conservative perspective on interpretation that belies his repeated espousal of an avowedly liberatory reading practice.

Gustavo Pellón’s “Cortázar and the Idolatry of Origins” is constructed around a series of rereadings and renegotiations of Cortázar by Cortázar himself. In his last published book, *Salvo el crepúsculo*, Cortázar collected

a number of miscellaneous poetic texts from throughout his literary career, among them “Grecia 59,” a poem in which he reevokes his youthful admiration for Greek culture in a moment of later maturity – a moment of recollection itself reread in the comments that serve as a preface to the poem now being published for the first time. Through a painstaking and intelligent close reading, Pellón follows the thread of Cortázar’s fascination with origins as it manifested itself in his early mystification of Greek culture – the putative source of Western rationality – and his later questioning of that category. In the final embracing of Dionysian irrationality in a text that arises out of what Cortázar calls a “distracted” form of writing, Pellón sees an anticipation of the attack on rationalism and the serious yet goal-less playing that will be the cornerstones of *Hopscotch*.

Andrew Bush attempts to broach what is perhaps Cortázar’s most haunting work, the photographic montage *Prose from the Observatory* (*Prosa del observatorio*), in his essay “Supposing Morelli Had Meant to Go to Jaipur.” In 1967 Cortázar visited and photographed the observatory built in Jaipur in the eighteenth century by Sultan Jai Singh. The photographs were then published alongside a meditation on the observatory by Cortázar, spurred by a scientific article on the life cycle of eels. Bush sees in the execution of this text a radical departure from Cortázar’s literary figurations: rather than positing two conceptual poles to then propose a vehicle or avenue for achieving unity out of duality (a maneuver related to the will to interpretive power observable in scientific discourse), or engaging in formal actualizations of theoretical pronouncements about literature (such as we saw earlier in *62: A Model Kit*), Cortázar is content here with navigating discursively without final recourse to an enabling synthesis. The language and structure of Bush’s essay bespeak a desire to allow his critical discourse the same free ranging through a field composed of a heterogeneous collection of texts as that evinced by Cortázar’s work. The essay is thus held together in a rigorously playful fashion through the equally demanding displacement of the writing subject throughout works that are ultimately linked by the critic’s readerly experience of them.

Cortázar’s conflicted and complex concerns with the political are the subject of the two essays included under the part title “Reading Politics.” The conventional critical plot reviewed earlier sees Cortázar as becoming progressively committed politically with time, from an early defense of a revolutionary praxis within the confines of literary form (“revolution in

literature” rather than “literature in the revolution”) to the later public statements and short stories that manifest solidarity with the Sandinista project in Nicaragua. And yet, the contributions included here attest to the fact that the presence of the political in Cortázar will not yield to easy formulas or commonplace assumptions.

Alberto Moreiras’s “‘Apocalypse at Solentiname’ as Heterological Production” is a headlong plunge into the intricacies of what is perhaps Cortázar’s most significant “statement” regarding the relationship between literature and politics. His intention is to move away from those readings of “Apocalipsis in Solentiname” that perceive it mainly as a document of denunciation against political violence. Moreiras sees the story as a series of attempts at representation or translation – from the painterly reproduction of a supposedly Arcadian peasant reality by Nicaraguan peasants in the island community of Solentiname, to the photographic appropriation of the latter by the protagonist of the story, to the subsequent projection of the photographs onto a screen in a Paris apartment. These operations are predicated on the existence of two kinds of “writing”: one univocal and closed; the other multiple and disseminated. The ingenuous project of mimetic appropriation of the image – which parallels the utopian social experiment of the community in Solentiname – is put in check by what Moreiras calls the inescapable “loss of semiotic coincidence between model and copy.” This creates a milieu for the return with a vengeance of that knowledge which has been repressed. Moreiras finally argues that it is in the midst of this theater of representation that any understanding of political solidarity on Cortázar’s part must be properly understood.

Frederick Luciani’s article, “The Man in the Car/in the Trees/behind the Fence: From Cortázar’s ‘Blow-up’ to Oliver Stone’s *JFK*,” proposes to study the ambiguous presence of Cortázar’s short story “Blow-Up” (“Las babas del diablo”) in a collection of American films extending from the 1960s to the 1990s – what he refers to as “Cortázar’s wayward and unrecognized Hollywood progeny”: Brian De Palma’s *Greetings* and *Blow Out*, Francis F. Coppola’s *The Conversation*, and Oliver Stone’s *JFK*. Luciani’s genealogical investigation also includes Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* as a “precursor” to “Blow-up,” as well as the famous “Zapruder film,” which accidentally captured the Kennedy assassination in Dallas. It also ends with a consideration of “Apocalypse in Solentiname,” in which the author sees Cortázar again taking up the issues raised in his earlier text. Luciani reads in the American tradition “founded” by Cortázar’s story an

attempt to politicize the narrative through an emphasis on conspiracy theories rather than through engagement in a systematic ideological critique. He presents, as an alternative to this version of a political resemanticization of “Blow-Up,” Cortázar’s own subsequent reworking of that story in “Apocalypse in Solentiname.”

The two essays in “The Ethics of Reading” are closely related to those in the previous part on the political in Cortázar, insofar as the political can never be cleanly separated from the question of ethics. In them the authors explore Cortázar’s understanding of literature as a discourse that knows something about itself and about its own capacity to affect the world that produces it materially and to which it refers, directly or implicitly. What is – finally – the link between literature and truth, when is literature more truthful to its own nature, and how Cortázar’s works are inscribed in this problematic are the essential concerns addressed by these essays.

In “Pursuing a Perfect Present” Doris Sommer sets her interpretive agenda against a possible deconstructive reading of Cortázar’s story “The Pursuer” (“El perseguidor”) – namely, an interpretation that would dismantle oppositions by showing the reducibility of the two terms of the ruling binary of the story (jazz performer versus music critic) to one another. She argues that such a reading would conceal the explicitly constructed nature of the difference on which the narrative is based, therefore endowing the latter with a homogeneity that would do violence to it. Instead, she proposes to read the story as a fable about the very refusal to overcome difference. In her view, there is in the narrative an ongoing struggle between the musician and his biographer for the mutual reduction of the Other that is significant precisely because of its undecidability. The similarities between the opponents that a deconstructive reading would emphasize entail the threat of the disappearance of those differences from which each character derives his particularity and identity. Hence, the story is seen by Sommer as acquiring its full significance in the context of intersubjective negotiations, an insight that she extends to Cortázar’s awareness of the appropriating and fixating tendencies of writing.

Aníbal González’s “‘Press Clippings’ and Cortázar’s Ethics of Writing” is a trenchant exploration of Cortázar’s understanding of the relationship between literature and evil. It takes as its point of departure the demand placed on Latin American writers to use literature as an instrument for the denunciation of social ills and argues that literature’s effectiveness in such a task is bound to be compromised by the relationship to violence

and negativity that is intrinsic to it. “Press Clippings” is the text in which Cortázar faces squarely the implications of this intuition for any programmatic assertion of solidarity asserted by a literary text. But according to González, Cortázar also eschews the facile association of literature with transgression that Georges Bataille’s work would have made available to him as a form of personal consolation. In this regard, Cortázar’s position – González argues – is a profoundly ethical one, as it precludes the possibility of letting him turn into a virtue what is clearly regarded by Cortázar as a failure. Furthermore, because the collagelike texture of the story is analogous to that of Cortázar’s novelistic oeuvre after *Hopscotch*, one might perhaps read the story as a reconsideration by him of his earlier understanding of writing as an essentially playful activity.

As is perhaps evident even from these brief presentations, the essays gathered in this anthology intersect in a manner that will become increasingly obvious as the reader’s itinerary advances. I would now like to try to identify some of the ways in which the individual pieces transcend their engagement with specific texts and problematics of Cortázar’s oeuvre and, rather, point collectively to an alternative configuration of his writing.

I have already suggested that the articles which concern themselves with the question of the political in Cortázar are complemented by those which address the inscription of ethical considerations in his works. The essays grouped under both categories are arguing that there exists in Cortázar a desire to claim a space for ambiguity and suspension in the face of the commonly understood axiological demands of both politics and ethics. This is clearly the case in the essays by González, Sommer, and Mor-eiras, all of which propose to recognize in several of Cortázar’s texts a compelling interrogation of comfortable notions regarding writing, ethics, and politics. In Luciani’s essay, this dimension is identified in the re-inscription of the political that, according to him, constitutes the rewriting of “Blow-Up” into “Apocalypse in Solentiname.” This critical maneuver also serves as a point of connection with the essays grouped under the heading “Cortázar Reads Cortázar.” For the articles by Kerr, Pellón, and Bush are intent on pointing out the existence of an internal reformulation and critique of the presuppositions that controlled Cortázar’s ideology of writing at various points in his career. Each depicts a “moment” in which a self-critical operation obtains within Cortázar’s oeuvre, a moment that has to be configured as integral to his writing on account of its repeated, continual occurrence throughout his literary career. This is the

same critical operation that can be seen at work under various guises in the essays collected in the first part, “Reading Cortázar Today.” Amar Sánchez locates it in Cortázar’s dismantling of the long-standing Spanish American narrative of identity. Here, the critical regard is turned outward to confront the master narrative tropes of Spanish American cultural discourse rather than the presuppositions of Cortázar’s own writing. In Prieto’s essay the division is configured as a psychoanalytic splitting of the subject, whereas Franco’s piece is built on the presumption of an internal chasm, as its purpose is to assert instead a continuity that belies the avowed transformations in Cortázar’s oeuvre. Similarly, Larsen sees the difference between the past vitality of *Hopscotch* and its present caducity as an effect of the emergence of a new dominant reading optics, a proposal that projects that schism onto the history of the novel’s reception.

One could argue, then, that the Cortázar who emerges from these essays is one who calls into question what has been traditionally regarded as the essential paradigm of his textual universe: the original positing of an oppositional duality whose effectiveness and viability are denied by depicting the passage from one term of the opposition to the other. Collectively, these essays alert us to the fact that the dynamics ruling Cortázar’s works is not built on the dissolution of opposition by effecting a movement from one pole to the other, but rather on the displacement away from the dichotomy itself to a third “position” that defines a space in which those categories are suspended or rendered ineffectual. The cleavage created by this movement in each work, as well as in Cortázar’s production as a whole, generates the internal difference that the essays gathered here have identified in their various ways. A brief examination of *Hopscotch* will prove illustrative of this procedure, which I argue is constitutive of Cortázar’s literary discourse as a whole.

Traditionally, duality has been taken to be the structuring force behind the various levels of Cortázar’s best-known novel: Paris versus Buenos Aires; the two texts of *Hopscotch* described by the famed “Table of Instructions” (Tablero de Dirección); Oliveira versus Traveler; La Maga versus Talita; the *lector hembra* versus the *lector cómplice*; the novel versus a poetics of the novel. And yet there is clearly another dimension of the text in which those structuring polarities are undermined by positing a third term that cannot be incorporated into either one of the two poles, or that results from a conflation of the two. The reader will remember the apparent division of *Hopscotch* into two large sections, “From This Side” and “From That Side,” only to have yet a third section that negates