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Julio Cortázar or The Slap in the Face

BY LUIS HARSS

with the collaboration of BARBARA DOHMANN

THE YEARS have shown, in our part of the world, as elsewhere, that those who live at odds with their land are often the ones that understand it best. Perhaps only they are in a position to hit the nail hard enough to drive it home. If, in our novel, feelings of brotherhood are giving way to open provocations that occasionally end in assault and battery, it is because it needed a bit of effrontery to make it live more vibrantly. World War II was something of a dividing line for us. It brought a drastic century to our doorstep at a time when we had already begun to part company with ourselves. This was particularly true of Argentina, a land of fallen idols. There the morning after dawned early. And with it were born the kiss of death and the slap in the face.

For our literature, they were blessings. There is something healthy, in a communal art, about the novel that establishes its own premises. When our writers were accomplices of reality, they ended up being swindled by it. But now they are astute enough to tread warily where once they would have rushed in blindfold. There is a distrust of reality that has blunted its extortionary edge. Once upon a time the novelist was desperate to establish a peaceful coexistence with his surroundings. Today he can do without it. It never existed anyway. Because under the appearance of friendly agreement, lurked that old enmity which, from the beginning of time, whether it took the form of intolerable love or bitter antagonism, has nourished man's longstanding quarrel with the world.

That we have begun to accept this quarrel, instead of glossing it over, is a hopeful sign for us. Discontent and maladjustment have brought excitement to our literature, which now dares to challenge,

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not only the immediate, but the irremediable. The Latin American novelist today fights an unequal battle, and stands a good chance to go down in it. But that is just the point. By laying himself open all the way in his work, for the first time he leaves something in it that can survive him. He is not merely a disgruntled misfit but the eternal rebel. If he seems to have come to a parting of the ways with his society, it is because his relations with it are too passionate not to be forever ambivalent. If there is harshness in his words and violence in his gestures, it is because honesty is brutal. Our old writer, even in his moments of diatribe, was never really outspoken on fundamental matters. There were always unmentionable or untouchable areas that stayed out of range. But now the novelist, working in the depths of a new solitude, is beginning to find the words for a truer dialogue.

The fact is that since Arlt, our novel, which used to barely skim surfaces, has gone under to the root of things. It took a plunge in Marechal's revolutionary *Adanbuenosayres* and another in Onetti's *La Vida Breve.*

In the Fifties and early Sixties, it delved into the shadows of Argentine society in the work of Ernesto Sabato. Lately, after a penitential silence of many years—he was snubbed in 1948 by the literary establishment because of his Peronist sympathies—there has been the return of a somewhat depleted Marechal, in a recent arcane medley, *El Banquete de Severo Arcángel* (1966). Marechal, continuing his old fight against Ordinary Life in the technological robot-age, invites us to an infernal feast that, like Trimalchio's Agape, Plato's banquet or the Last Supper, may turn out to be a prelude to beatific vision. He is a man with an "Arcadian obsession," a "Messianic madness." Embodied in his Cyclopean hero, a metallurgist turned alchemist, he has come to the end of his rope, exhausting human possibilities, and entered a "frontier zone" of rotating tables and spinning chairs designed to reproduce the cosmic whirl. We are in the realm of pure symbol, a giant existential foundry, a power plant exploded by nuclear fission, to return us to a distant idyllic watershed. There is much of the sleight-of-hand in *El Banquete de Severo Arcángel.* Yet in its mystic embroidery we recognize the touch of a Magister Ludi willing to bet his life and fate on mysterious games of fortune. But in this area, since *Rayuela (Hopscotch)*, Cortázar rules supreme. He is our greatest prestidigitator.

CORTÁZAR IS THE EVIDENCE we needed that there is a powerful mutant strain in our literature. It leads toward a mystic border line. "Where frontiers end, roads vanish," says Octavio Paz. And so it is with Cortázar. He works toward the outer limits of experience, thumbing his nose at the world. He is a brilliant wit, and a tireless innovator, who has given us a lot to ponder. The tendency in certain circles has been to accuse him of a lack of seriousness, probably with some justification, at least to the extent that he insists on pulling chairs out from under us all. Certainly there is an element of the practical joker in him. But it lives in close quarters with the visionary. How Cortázar became what he is, is a disconcertingly difficult question to answer. In his early days he was a sort of Borgesian aesthete, a qualifier to which he is not entirely invulnerable even today. But there was a change in mid-road. For a while he leaned on the traditional props of the psychological novel. But that was a transitory stage. Whatever genre he touched, he seemed immune—or soon inured—to its conventions. He is a man of strong antibodies. Nowadays he has no use for what he considers easy effects: pedestrian dramatic situations, platitude or pathos. He travels along his own circuits. His importance is hard to assess. He wonders himself what it all amounts to. "I don't flatter myself that I'll be able to achieve anything transcendental," he says skeptically. But there is little doubt that he already has. He has immensely broadened the prospects of our novel, not only by opening its doors to new themes, but also by pointing it in new directions. For him, as for few Latin American writers, his art has been a high calling. He is the first man in our literature to have built a complete fictional metaphysic. If, as all originals, he would seem to be a bit of an aside for the moment, the shock waves his work has spread may well be echoes of the future.

Cortázar, a true Argentine, is a many-sided man, culturally eclectic, elusive in person, mercurial in his ways. He is not a man who gives himself easily. There is something adamantly neat and precise about him that verges on punctiliousness. He received us two or three times and was always affable and straightforward with us, but perhaps a bit impersonal. There were areas that remained out of bounds. And those were the ones that counted. It was in his whimsical moments that we caught some hints of the true Cortázar, the man who imagines old aunts falling flat on their backs, families building gallows in their front gardens, governments collapsing on Leap Year, and mirrors

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clocking time on Easter Island. Behind these figments is a mind with as many facets as a diamond, as intricate as a spiderweb. Physically Cortázar is something of an anomaly for a Latin American. He cuts a considerable figure, well over six feet tall, lanky, long-legged and freckled as a Scotsman. There is a child in his eyes. He looks much too young for his age. In fact, his generally boyish air is almost unsettling. An eternal child prodigy keeps winking at us from his work.

Cortázar has an intriguing background that makes him heir to an old dilemma. He was born in 1914, of Argentine parents—in Brussels. His ancestors were Basques, Frenchmen and Germans. He has spent a lot of his time welding opposites. From the age of four he was brought up in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, a city whose instincts and attitudes run deep in his work. No one has stronger emotional ties with his land than Cortázar. But intellectually he has lived beyond it, in a broader context. There has been agony in his constant inward migration between physical roots and spiritual affinities. The displaced persons in his books testify to the length and depth of a conflict that has never been satisfactorily settled. Yet in some way it has been put to fruitful use. Cortázar has always managed to rise comfortably above the narrowness of our cultural outlook. Like Borges, he has always been something of an expatriate at heart. "My generation," he says, "was considerably at fault in its youth in that it lived, to a large degree, with its back turned to Argentina. We were great snobs, although many of us only realized that later. We read very few Argentine writers and were almost exclusively interested in English and French literature, with a bit of Italian and American literature thrown in, and some German literature, which we read in translation. It wasn't until we were about thirty years old that suddenly many of my friends and I discovered our own tradition. People dreamed of Paris and London. Buenos Aires was a sort of punishment. Living there was being in jail." So unbearable was it, in fact, that at the age of eighteen he and a group of friends made an abortive attempt to set sail for Europe in a cargo boat. Yet when he finally made it there—he moved permanently to Paris in 1951—instead of breaking his attachments with his land he took it with him, and has been wrestling with its phantom shapes ever since.

Compared to that of some of our more prolific writers, Cortázar's production has been slim: three novels—one unpublished—a bit of poetry, a few dozen short stories. But almost every bit of it counts. Creative fatigue, that common ill of our authors toward middle age,

when an early bloom is ruined by faulty plumbing, is unknown to him. An unflagging inventiveness and imagination, combined with sure markmanship, have kept him steadily growing in stature through the years. Today, at the height of his powers, his restless and inquiring mind tells him his work is more unfinished than ever.

HE WAS FIRST HEARD FROM AROUND 1941—the exact date is vague in his mind—with a small book of sonnets, published under the pseudonym of Julio Dénis, that he no longer cares to talk about. The sonnets were "very Mallarméan," he says succinctly. He had lofty aims at the time. There was a long silence, and then in 1949 he published *Los Reyes* (*The Kings*), a series of dialogues on the subject of the Cretan Minotaur, rather stately in style, abstract, intellectual, overrefined, reflecting his bookish addiction to classical mythology. There was nothing of particular note in those early works. But already in 1951, only two years after *Los Reyes,* he made what seems a complete about-face and came out with a stunning little volume called *Bestiario.* It was lean and luminous, and struck a keynote: the fantastic, suddenly revealing a master sorcerer. Cortázar had read his Poe, Hawthorne and Ambrose Bierce, as well as his Saki, Jacobs, H. G. Wells, Kipling, Lord Dunsany, E. M. Forster, and, closer to home, Lugones, the old master Quiroga, and, of course, Borges. He was a skillful storyteller—too skillful, perhaps. Five years later, in *Final del Juego* (*End of the Game,* 1956), he was still hard at work conjuring up his spells, a bit too scrupulously. Repeated exercises in an unchanging vein had given him an unfair advantage over himself, he says; he had begun to doubt his progress. There were already clear signs of a transition into new territory in his next collection of stories, *Las Armas Secretas* (*Secret Weapons,* 1959). Among them was "El Perseguidor" ("The Pursuer"), which marked a break in his work. It issued in what we might call his Arltian phase. Without sacrificing the imaginary, he had begun to draw live characters taken from real life, with their feet on the ground. His style had also become more muscular. He was beginning to shed aestheticism. Perhaps until then playing with literature had been his way of creating a fantasy world around himself to shield him against certain unpleasant realities. But now, more at home with himself, he took a closer look at the world. What he saw he described in 1960 in his first novel, *Los Premios* (*The Winners,* Pantheon, 1965). It was the somewhat defective and shapeless book of an author fumbling toward a subject and new forms to go with it. It

was followed, in 1962, by *Historias de Cronopios y de Famas*, an assortment of loose notes, sketches, brief insights into hidden dimensions that demonstrate the author's fondness for fruitful improvisation. The Cronopios and Famas, playful poltergeists with coined names and strange habits, were blobs in a bubble world in some ways not unlike the real one. With this book Cortázar seemed to pause and take a deep breath. What followed was a hurricane. It was called *Rayuela* (1963)—an "anti-novel" that shows every sign of having represented a major breakthrough for him. *Rayuela* is a therapeutic book, intended as a complete course of treatment against the empty dialectics of Western civilization and the rationalist tradition. It is an ambitious work, at once a philosophical manifesto, a revolt against literary language and the account of an extraordinary spiritual pilgrimage. The Cortázar of *Rayuela* is a deep-sea diver who comes up with a full net. He is a man of many means, contorted, contradictory, exuberant, paradoxical, polemic: not only a great wit and humorist, outshining all others in our literature, but also—as he shows in a pithy appendix somewhat detached from the main body of the narrative—a brilliantly aggressive, if slightly pedantic, literary theorist.

Cortázar and his wife, Aurora, who value their independence above all things, earn a living as free-lance translators for UNESCO, where their job, as he says somewhat wryly, is to help "maintain the purity of the Spanish language." They take it in stride for about six months a year, including an annual trip to Vienna for a meeting of the Atomic Energy Commission, then spend their holidays in retirement in their summer house in southern France, or in Venice. They like to go gallivanting together, and their taste tends to the unusual. They frequent provincial museums, marginal literatures, lonely side-streets. They resent intrusions in their privacy, avoid literary circles, and rarely grant interviews; they would just as soon never meet anybody, Cortázar says. They admire the readymade objects of Marcel Duchamp, cool jazz, and the scrap-metal sculptures of César. Cortázar once spent two years of his life translating the complete works of Poe; Aurora is an excellent translator of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Cortázar visited the U.S. in 1960, principally Washington—and New York, where he spent most of his time in the Village, windowshopping in back alleyways. Something of what struck him there he pulled out of his bag of tricks later in portraying the American characters in *Rayuela*. He has always been a sort of intellectual pickpocket. To pick and choose—making an intelligent use of chance and coincidence—is

also to create, he says. As proof of this he offers the long delirious insert in the appendix of *Rayuela* called "La Luz de la Paz del Mundo" ("The Light of the Peace of the World"), for the text of which he is indebted to one Ceferino Piriz, a "mad genius" residing somewhere in Uruguay, who submitted it to a contest at UNESCO as his contribution to solving the problems of the world. It provides a Master Plan for dividing our globe into color zones and distributing armaments according to surface and population. Cortázar liked it because he saw it as a perfect example of the kind of raving madness that pure reason can lead to—the last thing the mad lose is their reasoning power, Chesterton said—so he lifted it, without changing a word. And the truth is that it seems very much in place in a fictional landscape where farce and metaphysics join hands to beat a path across ultimate lines, among elements of apocalyptic scenery that seem to have come out of some monstrous clearance sale in a flea market or a Turkish bazaar.

By contrast, the Cortázar home, a three-floor pavillion overlooking a quiet, shady courtyard, is a world of light and order. Our visit takes place on a dark autumn night. A gust of wind sweeps us in the door. We shake a bony hand, and a narrow spiral staircase leads us up into a spacious drawing room with austere furnishings: a low central table, flat modern sofas, Venetian blinds, abstract paintings on the walls. The Cortázars took over some years ago what must have been an old barn or stable in a state of decrepitude and completely remodeled it. Their thin years are over. Black crossbeams support the ceiling. A tribal sculpture—a souvenir from a trip to Africa—looks down on us with a beneficent smile. In *Rayuela* there is a circus tent with a hole in the top, through which the protagonists catch a glimpse of Sirius. Here, too, on clear nights, you can see the stars through the skylight. A bookcase which spans a whole wall reflects Cortázar's somewhat unconscionable preferences: sixty per cent of the books are in French, thirty per cent in English, only a splenetic ten per cent in Spanish.

Cortázar sits with his long legs crossed, his hands clasped on his knees, prim and prudent. He is a man of intellectual passions, reticent about himself. Yet where his work is concerned—he is unassuming, but without false modesty—he speaks freely, and always to the point.

Although he made what one might call his official literary debut—with *Los Reyes*—when he was thirty-five, he has been writing practically all his life, he tells us. "Like all children who like to read, I soon tried to write. I finished my first novel when I was nine years old. . . . And so on. And poetry inspired by Poe, of course. When I

was twelve, fourteen, I wrote love poems to a girl in my class. . . . But after that, it wasn't until I was thirty or thirty-two—apart from a lot of poems that are lying about here and there, lost or burned—that I started to write stories." But he did not publish them. There was caution, and perhaps some arrogance, in his delay. "I knew instinctively that my first stories shouldn't be published," he says. "I'd set myself a high literary standard, was determined to reach it before publishing anything. The stories were the best I could do at the time, but I didn't think they were good enough though there were some good ideas in them." He reworked some of the ideas later. But "I never took anything to a publisher. For a long time I lived far from Buenos Aires. . . . I'm a schoolteacher. I graduated from a normal school in Buenos Aires, completed the studies for a teacher's degree, and then entered the Liberal Arts School of the University. I passed my first-year exams, but then I was offered a job teaching some courses in a town in the province of Buenos Aires, and since there was very little money at home and I wanted to help my mother, who'd educated me, at great cost and sacrifice—my father had left home when I was a very small child and had never done anything for the family—I gave up my university studies at the first chance I had to work when I was twenty years old and moved to the country. There I spent five years as a high-school teacher. And that was where I started to write stories, though I never dreamed of publishing them. A bit later, I moved to Mendoza, to the University of Cuyo, where I was offered some courses, this time at the university level. In 1945-46, at the time of all the Peronista troubles, since I knew I was going to lose my job because I'd been in the fight against Perón, when Perón won the presidential election, I resigned before I was backed against a wall as so many colleagues were who held onto their jobs, and found work in Buenos Aires. And there I went on writing stories. But I was very doubtful about having a book published. In that sense I think I was always very clear-sighted. I watched myself develop, and didn't force things. I knew that at a certain moment what I was writing was worth quite a bit more than what was being written by other people of my age in Argentina. But, because of the high idea I have of literature, I thought it was a stupid habit to publish just anything as people used to do in Argentina in those days when a twenty-year-old youngster who'd written a handful of sonnets used to run around trying to have them in print. If he couldn't find a publisher, he'd pay for a personal edition himself. . . . So I held my fire."

JULIO CORTÁZAR

Courtesy of Pantheon Books. Photograph by José Gelabert.

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The confidence and equanimity with which Cortázar confronted his literary prospects might suggest a particularly favorable atmosphere at home, but there was no such thing. He had to make it more or less on his own. His family, on both sides, were all white-collar workers. They belonged to that category of half-educated people "who, as Chesterton said, are the worst kind. Which has nothing to do with affection. These are strictly intellectual matters. . . . But I was lucky in one sense. In the normal school where I studied, an abysmally bad school, one of the worst schools imaginable, I nevertheless managed to make a few friends, four or five. Many of them have become brilliant poets, painters or musicians. So, of course, we formed a sort of hard core of resistance against the horrible mediocrity of the teachers and the rest of our schoolmates. It's the only way to survive in Argentina. When I finished my studies I kept in close contact with those friends, but later, when I left for the country I was completely isolated and cut off. I solved that problem, if you can call it solving it, thanks to a matter of temperament. I was always very ingrown. I lived in small towns where there were very few interesting people, almost none. I used to spend the day in my room in my hotel or boardinghouse, reading and studying. That was very useful to me, and at the same time it was dangerous. It was useful in the sense that I consumed thousands of books. I certainly picked up a lot of book knowledge in those days. It was dangerous," he adds, looking back with indulgence on those years of encyclopedic erudition, "in that it probably deprived me of a good share of vital experience."

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THIS PROBLEM IS *Los Reyes*—now out of print—: a series of dialogues ("a dramatic poem," he calls it) on the subject of Theseus and the Minotaur. "There are dialogues between Theseus and the Minotaur, between Ariadne and Theseus, and between Theseus and King Minos. It's a curious approach to the subject, because it's a defense of the Minotaur. Theseus is portrayed as the standard hero, a typical unimaginative conventional individual rushing head-on, sword in hand, to kill all the exceptional or unconventional monsters in sight. The Minotaur is the poet—the being who is different from others, a free spirit, who therefore has been locked up, because he's a threat to the established order. In the opening scene, King Minos and Ariadne discuss the Minotaur, and you learn that Ariadne is deeply in love with the Minotaur—her half-brother, since they're both children of Pasiphaë. Then Theseus arrives from Athens

to kill the Minotaur, and that's when Ariadne gives him the famous thread so he won't get lost when he winds his way into the labyrinth. But in my version the reason why she gives him the thread is that she hopes the Minotaur will kill him and then follow the thread out of the labyrinth to join her. In other words, my version is the exact opposite of the classical one."

Not that the switch made much of an impression on the Argentine literary public.

Los Reyes was not exactly received by acclamation, says Cortázar. It was hardly noticed. Borges read it and liked it enough to print it in a magazine he was in charge of at the time, but otherwise there was "an absolute and total silence."

But he was not discouraged. By then he had a lot of other coals in the fire. "I was completely sure that from about, say, 1947, all the things I'd been putting away were good, some even very good. I'm referring, for example, to some of the stories of *Bestiario*. I knew nobody had written stories like that before in Spanish, at least in my country." He was in no hurry. A short novel that he had finished at the time, which some friends had tried to get published for him, had been turned down for "its nasty words," a rejection that did not bother him in the least. Again, on the eve of his trip to Europe, in 1951, a few close friends who knew the stories of *Bestiario* in manuscript form snatched them from his hands to show to the Editorial Sudamericana, which published them immediately, but without any success. In the meantime, even when he was in Buenos Aires, he had been leading a very solitary life. He was satisfied to have a small but distinguished audience, which, aside from Borges, a staunch supporter to whom he acknowledges a special debt of gratitude, included the other members—Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo—of the editorial board of the little magazine (*Los Anales de Buenos Aires*) that had printed *Los Reyes*.

Los Reyes was originally published in a limited edition by a friend, Daniel Devoto. It was never sold commercially, or reissued in any form. Which is something less than a tragedy, according to Cortázar, because "the truth is, I'm still very fond of *Los Reyes*, but it really has little or nothing to do with anything I've written since. It's done in a very lofty style, very polished and highflown, fine in its own way, but basically very traditional. Something like a cross between Valéry and St. John Perse."

Nevertheless, the book introduces an image that makes a recurrent

appearance in his work: the labyrinth. Here it is mere frontispiece and curlicue, but there is a Cortázar who attaches a deeper significance to this archetypal symbol. He says he is the last to know what obscure biographical sources—or literary reminiscences—may lie behind it. But in its web he discovers remnants of a childhood pattern. He remembers that "as a child, anything connected with a labyrinth was fascinating to me. I think this shows in a lot of my work. I used to construct labyrinths in my garden. I set them up everywhere. For instance, from my house in Banfield"—a suburb of Buenos Aires—"to the station there were about five blocks. When I was alone, I used to hop all the way. My labyrinth was a fixed road I'd laid out for myself. It consisted in going from sidewalk to sidewalk and jumping to land on certain stones I liked. If I miscalculated for any reason, or didn't land on the right spot, I had a feeling something was wrong, that I'd failed somewhere. For several years, I was obsessed by that ceremony. Because that's what it was: a ceremony."

Ceremonial children's games are omnipresent in Cortázar's work, often with labyrinthian implications. The whole of *Bestiario* is like the title story, where the emotional problems of a sensitive little girl take on nightmarish proportions in the form of a ferocious tiger she imagines inhabiting the back room of a mansion full of interconnecting doors and crisscrossing corridors. In "Casa Tomada" ("House Taken Over"), a brother and sister are gradually crowded out of house and home by the encroachment of unknown occupants (their ancestors?) who keep appropriating rooms and slamming doors in their faces. In "Los Venenos" ("Poisons") in *Final del Juego*, the labyrinth is an anthole with mazes of underground passageways. Then, of course, there is the labyrinthian street game that gives its name to *Rayuela*.

Cortázar throws light on his intentions, remarking that *Rayuela* was originally to be entitled *Mandala*. "When I first got the idea for the book, I was very much taken with the notion of Mandala, because I'd been reading a lot of books of anthropology and above all of Tibetan religion. Besides I'd been in India and I'd seen many reproductions of Japanese and Indian mandalas." A mandala, he recalls, is a sort of mystic labyrinth—"a design, like a hopscotch chart, divided into sections or compartments, on which the Buddhists concentrate their attention and in the course of which they perform a series of spiritual exercises. It's the graphic projection of a spiritual process. Hopscotch, as almost all children's games, is a ceremony with a mystic and religious origin. Its sacred value has been lost. But not entirely. Uncon-

sciously some of it remains. For instance, the hopscotch played in Argentina—and France—has compartments for Heaven and Earth at opposite ends of the chart. Now, I suppose as children we all kept ourselves amused with these games. But I had a real passion for them."

There are also labyrinthian overtones in *Los Premios*, where passengers on a mysterious boat attempt to gain access to the stern following a staircase down into the hold, into darkness and confusion. It is not easy to come out on the other side. The road is a long obstacle course—another sort of mandala that evolves as the plot unfolds. "In an existential sense," says Cortázar, "one might interpret the need the characters feel to reach the stern, to run a foreset course, as a desire to become realized as persons, as human beings. That's why some make it and others don't. It's a simpler notion, more rudimentary than in *Rayuela*."

In *Rayuela* the mandala is a course that leads to a "beyond," to a "fall toward the center," into what Cortázar, who dreams of an iggdrasil that will bind heaven and earth, describes as "a state of immanence" where opposites meet and one simply "is." *Rayuela* is an invitation to plunge through time in order to gain the far shore of eternity. It suggests a jump into the waters of selflessness, as well, says Cortázar, as in what Musil called "the search for the millenium: that sort of final island where man would at least find himself, reconciling his inner differences and contradictions."

Oriental philosophy, in particular Zen Buddhism and Vedanta, offers "metaphysical positions" that have always appealed to Cortázar. Vedanta, for instance, is predicated on "denying reality as we understand it, in our partial view of it; for instance, mortality, even plurality. We are all illusions in each other's mind; the world is always a way of looking at things. Each of us, from his standpoint, is total reality. Everything else is an external, phenomenological manifestation that can be wiped out in a flash because it has no real existence; its reality exists only, one might say, at the expense of our unreality. It's all a question of inverting the formula, shifting the weights on the scale. For instance, the notions of time and space, as they were conceived by the Greeks and after them by the whole of the West, are flatly rejected by Vedanta. In a sense, man made a mistake when he invented time. That's why it would actually be enough for us to renounce mortality—I've spoken about that somewhere in *Rayuela*—to take a jump out of time, on a plane other than that of daily life, of course. I'm thinking of the phenomenon of death, which for Western thought

has been a great scandal, as Kierkegaard and Unamuno realized so well; a phenomenon that is not in the least scandalous in the east where it is regarded not as an end but as a metamorphosis. The difference in the two outlooks is partly a difference of method: what we pursue discursively, philosophically, the Oriental resolves by leaping into it. The illumination of the Buddhist monk or the Master of Vedanta (not to speak of course of any number of Western mystics) is a bolt of lightning that releases him from himself and raises him to a higher plane where total freedom begins. The rationalist philosopher would say he is sick or hallucinated. But he had reached a state of total reconciliation that proves that by other than rational ways he has touched bottom."

In his own way, in *Rayuela*—via his protagonist, Oliveira, a man between two worlds, like his author—Cortázar has, too. Or at least he has tried to. "The attempt to find a center was, and still is, a personal problem of mine," he says. All his life he has been transferring it to his work without finding a concrete solution for it. Even the inexhaustible *Rayuela*, which provides a sort of unending catalog of available alternatives, in the end can offer only partial subterfuges. "*Rayuela*," says Cortázar, "shows to what extent the attempt is doomed to failure, in the sense that it isn't that easy for one to unburden oneself of the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition one has inherited and been shaped by."

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YET THE SEARCH for alternatives started early in Cortázar. Perhaps the search, in ersatz form, is implicit in all fantastic literature. This would be the Quirogan, the Borgesian, lesson. In this sense, Cortázar's fantastic stories, with their mysteriously disjunctive patterns, seem premonitory. There language, full of whispered hints, performs an almost ritual function. The stories are like incantations, psychic equivalents of magic formulas. One might compare them to charms that open doors, allowing the author a way out of himself. There is also what we might call a more practical side to them. Cortázar describes them as a sort of occupational therapy. "They're charms, they're a way out," he says, "but above all, they're exorcisms. Many of these stories, I can even single out a concrete example, are purgative, a sort of self-analysis." The case in point is "Circe," where a woman makes repulsive sweets with cockroaches inside, which she offers to her boyfriends. "When I wrote that story I was going through a time of exhaustion in Buenos Aires because I'd been studying to become a pub-

lic translator and was taking a whole battery of exams, one on top of another. I wanted to have a profession, to be financially independent, already with the idea of eventually moving to France. So I packed all the work for my degree into eight or nine months. It was backbreaking. I was tired and I started to develop neurotic symptoms; nothing serious—I didn't have to see a doctor. But it was very unpleasant because I acquired a number of phobias which became more preposterous all the time. I noticed that when I ate I was constantly afraid of finding flies or bugs in my food, food I had prepared at home and which I trusted completely. But time and again I'd catch myself scratching with my fork before each mouthful. That gave me the idea for the story—the idea of something loathsome and inedible. And when I wrote the story, it really acted as an exorcism, because after I'd written it I was immediately cured. . . . I suppose other stories are in the same vein."

The stories leave a varied impression on the reader. Some are subtle word games—crossword puzzles. Others, like "Omnibus" ("Busride"), one of the most speculative—and therefore most suggestive, which is why it has been interpreted as everything from a parable on death to a political allegory—seem to go crashing through barriers into unknown realms, to dip into orders of experience that are normally closed to us.

"The truth," says Cortázar, "is that though these stories, seen, let's say, from the angle of *Rayuela*, may seem like games, while I was writing them and when I wrote them I didn't think of them that way at all. They were glimpses, dimensions, or hints of possibilities that terrified or fascinated me and that I had to exhaust by working them off in the story."

Some were written at a sitting, spun out with almost supernatural force and intensity, says Cortázar—and the reader senses this. They were produced in a state of grace, which the author invites us to share with him. He is "on to" something, and points the way. Dramatic congruity or psychological verisimilitude are not important to him. The experience imposes its own terms. What counts is that we be able to relive it—not as a vicarious experience, comfortably identifying with characters and situations, but in the flesh, as it were. We are in a closed circuit, armed with verbal formulas that, when invoked, will unleash the same sequence of events inside us as they did inside the author.

The source of a story's power, says Cortázar, is inner tension. The

higher the tension, the better it transmits the author's pulsations. "What the exact method for transmitting these pulsations is, I can't say, but in any case, it depends on the ruthless execution of the story. The tense wiring permits a maximum freedom of action. In other words, I've watched myself writing at top speed—all in one breath, literally beside myself, without having to correct much afterwards; but that speed had nothing to do with the preparation of the story. I'd been concentrating my forces, bending backward to tighten my bow, and that increased my impetus when I sat down to write the story. The tension isn't in the execution of the story, though of course it remains trapped in the tissue from where it is later transmitted to the reader. The tension as such precedes the story. Sometimes it takes six months of tension to produce a long story that comes out in a single night. I think that shows in some of my stories. The best are packed full of a sort of explosive charge."

"Structures," he calls them. Words are mere touchstones in these stories; one finds oneself reading between the lines. The language is disarmingly simple and straightforward. There are no verbal flourishes, no tortured effects. The tone is conversational. The surface is crystal clear. But intangible forces are building up underneath. The clarity is made of shadowy undercurrents that gradually fuse in a climax with cathartic aftereffects. The reader, swept along, spills over the brim, delivered of himself.

An experience of this sort, no longer projected through fantasy but seen in the context of real life, becomes the actual theme and subject of a story somewhat later in the highly speculative "El Perseguidor," which in a sense makes Cortázar's previous work obsolete by rendering its preoccupations explicit, and perfectly down to earth. Here we have a Cortázar who may still be on the side of the angels, but with a foot on the ground. The setting of the story—made flagrant throughout—is Paris. When Cortázar wrote "El Perseguidor," he had long liquidated his affairs in Buenos Aires. He seems to be making this point in every line. But Cortázar points are turnstiles and tend to roll over on themselves and come up on the opposite side. And so to our surprise, in "El Perseguidor" we find ourselves in the numinous areas of Arltian low-life. We are introduced to an underworld character, Johnny Carter—alias Charlie Parker—a negro saxophonist, a man gifted by nature with metaphysical senses but of few intellectual resources, for whom music is not only a form of expression—a release into being—but an instrument in his search for an exit into godliness.

Johnny, who walks the cemeteries of the earth, trying to revive the dead, hears echoes of divine voices in broken urns. He is a kind of blind seer—a star-chaser, a man with a thirst for the absolute. He feels his true self mortgaged in space and time, a hostage waiting to be ransomed from the bondage of individuality. His talent is his strength, but also his undoing. Because basically he is a poor lost soul, ignorant of his powers, who lives in anguish and torment without ever knowing why. He has intimations of eternity, but cannot shape or grasp them. He thrashes about hopelessly in the dark. The road leads downhill, through drug-addiction into final madness. Like Oliveira—a man asphyxiated by intellectuality—and also Maga—a sort of embodiment of the poetic instinct in its pure form—in *Rayuela*, he has sudden intuitions, moments of inspiration, almost of mystic communion with the universe, but is too inept or, in his case, simpleminded, to form any sort of a coherent strategy out of them. They remain unfulfilled, mere flashes in the pan.

Cortázar says of "El Perseguidor": "In everything I'd written until that moment, I'd been satisfied with inventing pure fantasies. In *Bestiario*, in *Final del Juego*, the mere fact of imagining a fantastic situation that resolved itself in a way that was aesthetically satisfactory to me—I've always been demanding in that area—was enough for me. *Bestiario* is the book of a man whose inquiries don't carry beyond literature. The stories of *Final del Juego* belong in the same cycle. But when I wrote 'El Perseguidor,' I had reached a point where I felt I had to deal with something that was a lot closer to me. I wasn't sure of myself any more in that story. I took up an existential problem, a human problem which was later amplified in *Los Premios*, and above all in *Rayuela*. Fantasy for its own sake had stopped interesting me. By then I was fully aware of the dangerous perfection of the storyteller who reaches a certain level of achievement and stays on that same level forever, without moving on. I was a bit sick and tired of seeing how well my stories turned out. In 'El Perseiguidor' I wanted to stop inventing and stand on my own ground, to look at myself a bit. And looking at myself meant looking at my neighbor, at Man. I hadn't looked too closely at the human species until I wrote 'El Perseguidor.' "

WHEN HE WROTE *Los Premios*—and the unpublished *El Examen* (*The Exam*)—a bit later, he had already gone a long way toward remedying that deficiency. In *Los Premios*, the search for a "way out"—

playful at times, in spite of its underlying seriousness—has taken on an added dimension: now it is not only part of the subject matter, but a procedural element. The characteristic Cortazan light touch is present, here put to work to make things happen—in the Nerudan phrase—"without obstinate form." Cortázar is a freer man than he was before, more conversant with social and psychological reality. They might appear, for instance—as they do in *Rayuela*—in a lengthily erudite, and usually archly humorous, conversation on art, music or literature, but without intruding too obviously. Cortázar says he started the book during a long boat trip—out of boredom, "to keep myself entertained"—letting it develop at random, plotless. "I saw the situation as a whole, but in a very undefined and general way." He never knew for sure, from one chapter to the next, what to expect of himself. The result is rambling: a slow sprawl. It seems to be going nowhere. But it has pull. There are shrewd characterizations, some of them based on real people. Cortázar says: "I started to enjoy myself with the characterizations in the first chapters, which are too long, but I didn't have the faintest idea what was going to happen afterwards, though I'd already written quite a few pages. It was fascinating to me for awhile to pretend I was also one of the characters of the book. It meant that I didn't have any advantage over them, I wasn't a demiurge deciding fates on a whim. I faithfully respected the rules of the game." They were complicated rules that sometimes remained on the drawing board. But toward the middle of the book the plot and themes suddenly coalesced and finally condensed in an adroitly handled resolution.

The subject, on the surface, is a holiday cruise—a tour offered to a number of otherwise generally unrelated people who have been thrown together on board by sheer coincidence, simply because they all happened to draw winning numbers in a lottery. On a primary symbolic level, it is an inner trip each passenger takes toward self-confrontation. But it is also the author's own inner trip toward himself. The obstacles are many. The end remains equivocal and unattainable. Its physical representation is the stern of the boat, which for some unknown reason has been closed to the passengers. No one has access to it. Not even the author. "I was in the same position as Lopez or Medrano or Raúl," he says. "I didn't know what was happening astern either. It's a mystery to me to this day."

Mystery pervades the book. The ship's stern is shrouded in it. We do not know what to make of the situation. Certainly it must be very

grave. But who knows? It may all be a funeral joke. In any case, there are many disturbing signs on board. The crew behaves strangely. A conspiracy of silence? There are inexplicable absences—for instance, that of the boat doctor. The atmosphere becomes sinister, then mutinous. We suspect an illegal traffic of some sort. But nothing is revealed. We are probably in the hands of some mischievous underworld cartel ruled by an informal overlord who may turn out to be our other self.

A seductive aspect of *Los Premios*—and proof that Cortázar was looking at the world in spite of everything when he wrote it—is the psychopathological portrait it gives of the Porteño character. Cortázar is the farthest thing from a sociological-minded novelist, but—though he has a tendency, as he admits, to overlap instead of differentiating, his characters—he draws their essential traits well. A touch of satire adds spice to the narrative, particularly since it has the poignant edge of self-satire. The satirical intent is secondary. "Whenever the plot brought me face to face with ridiculous or disagreeable aspects of social relations," says Cortázar, anxious to establish this fact, "I drew them as I saw them. I had no reason not to. But the novel wasn't made for that purpose by any means. The critics tended to see Los Premios as an allegorical or satirical novel. It's neither one nor the other." Nevertheless, these diverse ingredients enrich the texture. We are shown a sort of cross-section of Porteño types: two circumspect and whimsical schoolteachers; a sedentary, fatuous old Galician millionaire; a high-minded homosexual; a promiscuous woman of the world with catholic tastes; an unbeautiful adolescent stranded in his doubtful sexuality; a representative from the Boca, the Genoese quarter in Buenos Aires, which produces specimens of what is known as the "reo porteño"—well-meaning, bighearted roughnecks, fanatic football fans, "completely guileless, terribly dumb, but made of good stuff, basically genuine and worthy"; a young honeymooning couple distinguished mainly for their smug self-satisfaction and rudeness. A large supporting cast—made up mostly of colorful "popular" characters, among them the cantankerous personnel—provides an occasionally loudmouthed backdrop to the drama.

A mystifying character in *Los Premios*, apparently something of a holdover from Cortázar's Minotauran days, is Persio, a stationary, more or less abstract, figure, a philosopher, a bit of an astrologer, who meditates the length of the work, commenting on the action in oracular asides that appear in the form of interior monologues. He has

little stage presence; he gives a sort of synthetic view of things, but in such abstruse language and so rarefied a tone that he often obscures what he is meant to illuminate. There is a whole literary clutter in Persio—the author's personal memorabilia—that suggests the bookworm and sometimes the wastebasket. Persio, in the course of his mediations, gives a symbol of the whole adventure on board the "Malcolm" equating the image of the boat with the shape of a guitar in a Picasso painting. Cortázar says that here again he was playing by ear. "After the first two chapters, one that takes place in a café on shore, the other showing the arrival on board the ship, you have the first monologue of Persio. When I'd written those first two chapters, I suddenly felt—and when I say 'felt,' I mean it literally—that the next thing had to be a different vision. And then Persio automatically became the spokesman for that vision. That's why I numbered his chapters differently and put them in italics. Besides, the language there is completely different." The intention, the reader might think, may have been to create a sort of alter ego of the author. But there is more to it than that. Persio, says Cortázar, "is not a spokesman for my ideas, even if he is in some sense, just as some of the other characters are, too. . . . Persio is the metaphysical vision of that everyday reality. Persio sees things from above, like a sea gull. He gives a kind of total and unifying vision of events. There, for the first time, I had an inkling of something that has been inhabiting me ever since, which I mention in *Rayuela* and which I'd now like to be able to develop fully in another book. It's the notion of what I call 'figures.' It's a feeling I have—which many of us have, but which is particularly intense in me—that apart from our individual lots we all inadvertently form part of larger figures. I think we all compose figures. For instance, we at this moment may be part of a structure that prolongs itself at a distance of perhaps two hundred meters from here, where there might be another corresponding group of people like us who are no more aware of us than we are of them. I'm constantly sensing the possibility of certain links, of circuits that close around us, interconnecting us in a way that defies all rational explanation and has nothing to do with the ordinary human bonds that join people." He recalls a phrase of Cocteau, to the effect that the individual stars which form a constellation have no idea that they are forming a constellation. "We see Ursa Major, but the stars that form Ursa Major don't know that they do. In the same way, we also may be forming Ursa Majors and Ursa Minors, without knowing it, because we're restricted

within our individualities. Persio has some of that structural view of events. He always sees things as a whole, as figures, in compound forms, trying to take an overall view of problems."

If Persio's abstract viewpoint seems a bit of an interference, it may be because we suspect it of being less metaphysical than aesthetic: a formal superstructure introduced artificially to satisfy the author's and reader's instincts for order. But here we are on uncertain grounds. The reproach has been held up to him more than once, says Cortázar. "But I have to say I've never held it up to myself. Because, in fact, Persio's monologues, though perhaps mainly aesthetic in effect, were born of an almost automatic writing, at great speed and without the control I deliberately kept over the rest of the novel. Instead of being conscious readjustments, they're like escape valves for a subconscious process. Besides they were written in the exact place where they stand. They weren't added afterwards as they might seem to have been. I'm sorry if they seem tacked on, but each fitted in exactly where it seemed to belong in the book. Something kept telling me there was a need to interrupt the sequence, to allow that other vision of things to take over for awhile. Of course, the reproach may still hold, because what counts is the result, not the needs of the moment." But perhaps Cortázar's instinct was right, after all, in using Persio's synthesizing vision as he did. Because there is a point in his work where the aesthetic and metaphysical meet. That is one of the beauties of *Rayuela*. Persio in *Los Premios* is the author's hand, still hesitant, for the first time attempting to make the two terms compatible.

More successful is the existential level of *Los Premios*. There, vividly real to us, always fundamentally true in word and gesture, half a dozen human fates play themselves out under high pressure, the breath of life in each of them as the author, in accordance with a secret scheme that gradually emerges from the shadows, realizes himself through them. Among them is Medrano, a dentist who has behaved as a heel, abandoning his mistress on shore, and finds the trip an occasion to do some soul-searching. A dramatic turn of events, masterfully travestied by the author, precipitates him into having "what the Zen Buddhists call satori: a sort of explosive fall-in toward himself." Medrano is a man who never watched too closely where he stepped. Perhaps there is a parable here about an author who graced many pages before he stopped to read what was already written there. When he did, he took remedial action. Medrano realizes what a thin line he has been walking. So off he goes—and the author, figuratively speaking, with him—

down the hatch, "on a headlong plunge which in the end he pays for dearly: with his skin."

WHICH IS ONLY AS IT SHOULD BE. Because Medrano, like Johnny Carter, is a member of Cortázar's family of starstruck searchers, who know that the true road is a difficult one, often to be purchased at a high price, with life—or sanity. The latter—and perhaps the former—is the case with Oliveira in *Rayuela*. Oliveira, a triumphantly backboneless character, pursues a devious path down a blind alley to destruction. At the end of the book, past the point of no return, we are uncertain as to whether he has committed suicide or simply fallen into complete madness. But the question is immaterial. What we know is that he has made a concerted effort, the length of his unwholesome but edifying adventure, to undermine himself at every step, to subvert rational barriers and collapse logical categories, and that finally he has lost his footing and gone off the deep end into bottomless waters. There is something heroically Quixotic about his career. Within his abjectness, the uncompromising—and sometimes perverse—doggedness and dignity with which he pursues his search give him a kind of pseudo-tragic stature. Oliveira lives in extremities, a ruinous shadow of himself, going from stranglehold to deadlock. A chronic dreamer, his predicament is that of the man who, by means of sterile sophistries, empty paradoxes, synthetic rationalizations, has pushed himself to the point where he is incapable of finding a reason to live or to do anything. Everything is the same to him: love, abstract thought, art, causes. He can find irrefutable pretexts to justify —or negate—all of them. He has chosen "a course of inaction, instead of action"; his energies go to waste in "a purely dialectical movement." It is easier for him "to think than to be." In his battle to "be," his weapons are mockery, outlandish farce, absurdity, outrageous clownishness.

"I detest solemn searches," says Cortázar. Which is one reason why he admires Zen. "What I like above all about the masters of Zen is their complete lack of solemnity. The deepest insights sometimes emerge from a joke, a gag or a slap in the face. In *Rayuela* there's a great influence of that attitude, I might even say of that technique."

As an example, he mentions the chapter about the wooden board toward the end of the book. Oliveira has returned to Buenos Aires after all his Parisian mishaps: his estrangement from Maga, the death of Maga's child, Rocamadour, his desperate and fruitless posturing.

He runs into an old friend, Traveler, in whom he eventually begins to recognize a sort of double of himself—an avatar of one of his own previous, more enlightened, phases; and at a given moment, in his confusion—which is compounded by acute bachelor pains—he starts to identify Traveler's wife, Talita, with his lost Maga. He has hotheaded dreams about her. Tensions mount and the problem comes to a head in an excruciatingly funny scene that has every external appearance of being completely insignificant. Oliveira and Traveler occupy rooms on opposite sides of the same street; their windows face each other. Oliveira, who has been setting up house, asks Traveler for some necessary implements; Talita is charged with delivering them. To shorten her road, Oliveira spans the distance between the two windows with a long wooden board, inviting her to cross over it. She accepts, taking her life in her hands. As she confronts Oliveira, halfway between him and her husband, hovering in mid-air, forty feet above the street, masks drop, baring faces in separate solitary agony.

"The chapter of the wooden board," says Cortázar, "I think, is one of the deepest moments in the book. Because lives are in the balance. Yet, from beginning to end, it's treated as a wild joke."

In *Rayuela,* jokes, gags, are not only dramatic elements, but stitches in the narrative fabric. Whole scenes are built on them. Cortázar is a great improviser. His humor can be harsh, hectic, grotesque, ironic, jeering. The episodic construction he uses favors his ends. He is a master of parody, jabberwocky, wordplay, non sequitur, obscenity and even cliché, which he exploits with predatory relish. Farce alternates with fantasy, slang with erudition. Puns, hyperbole, innuendo, sudden shifts and dislocations, all the resources of comic art, including virtuoso nonsense passages, are put to work with inexhaustible versatility.

Cortázar explains that certain forms of Surrealism may throw light on his methods. Modern French literature in general has left a deep mark on his work. Though as a young man he had so little sense of values, he says, that he could hardly distinguish between Montaigne and Pierre Loti, "I changed radically as a result of reading certain French writers—for instance, Cocteau. One day when I was about eighteen I read Cocteau's *Opium.* It was a flash of lightning that opened a new world to me." He threw out half his library and "plunged headfirst into the world Cocteau was showing me. Cocteau put me on to Picasso, Radiguet, the music of the Group of the Six, Diaghilev, all that world between 1915 and 1925, and Surrealism:

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Breton, Éluard, Crevel. The Surrealist movement has always fascinated me." Cortázar is one of those who think Surrealism was one of the great moments in this century until it was ruined by the Surrealists themselves, among others, when it became a mere literary movement instead of an attitude toward life. Cortázar has also been a great reader of two of Surrealism's direct ancestors: Apollinaire, and above all, Alfred Jarry. "Jarry," he says, "was a man who realized perfectly that the gravest matters can be explored through humor. That was just what he tried to do with his 'pataphysique'—to touch bottom via black humor. I think that notion had a great influence on my way of looking at the world. I've always thought humor is one of the most serious things there are." The respect for humor as a valid means of investigation is the sign of a high civilization, he believes. It indicates an ability to go prospecting for buried treasure without reaching for big phrases. "The English know that better than anybody. Much of great English literature is based on humor."

Humor, suggests Cortázar, can also be a useful defense mechanism in the more "surrealistic" circumstances of daily life. He remembers it served him well in Argentina in the Thirties and Forties, when reality had become "a sort of waking nightmare for me." Twenty years of social and political unrest came to a head with the advent of the Second World War, a difficult time in Argentina for anybody with a conscience. The country had bought neutrality—and an unprecedented surface prosperity—at the cost of self-respect. It was a period of hypocritical pacifism, of sham positions, false alliances, petty interests and shabby betrayals. Then came the added foolishness of Peronism. Cortázar, as so many of his disillusioned contemporaries, after a brief brush with politics when he was on the staff of the Liberal Arts School in Mendoza—he was actually imprisoned during a student mutiny—withdrew to the sidelines, into what he says frankly "may well have been nothing but escapism." The intellectual found himself in a somewhat ludicrous quandary those days. Because resistance to the dictatorship had polarized public opinion at opposite ends of the spectrum, his problem was where and how to take a stand in a situation that allowed for no middle way. For those who, like Cortázar, believed there were elements of genuine value in Peronism as a social movement but could not accept the leadership of Perón and his wife, or on the other hand find any effective way to channel their opposition to the regime without playing into the hands of other political speculators and opportunists, a possible solution was to disconnect

themselves rather guiltily from the scene and try to maintain their sanity through bitter laughter.

Laughter, in all its dimensions, is the key to *Rayeula*. Its aim is to catch the reader off-guard, penetrate his defenses and set off uncontrollable reflexes. Cortázar tiptoes among weighty matters like a housebreaker. Part of the effect he achieves in his best scenes is a result of the enormous distance that exists between the narrative surface and the underlying reality it encloses and encompasses. At moments a meeting occurs: parallel lines intersect. There is a burst of light. The multiple contrasting levels of a scene, and the disproportions and incongruities existing between them, often create a sense of high pathos.

"I think one of the moments in *Rayuela* where that works best is in the break-up scene between Oliveira and Maga. The scene is a long dialogue where a number of things come under discussion, none of which appear to have anything to do with the matter at hand. At one point they even burst out laughing and roll on the floor. There I really think I managed to get an effect that would have been impossible if I'd simply exploited the pathos in the situation. It would have been just one more break-up scene, like so many others in literature."

Another similar scene is the death of Rocamadour. The author plays it for laughs. It occurs in a dingy hotel room, during a smoky bull session, with jazz records in the background. Maga and Oliveira have gone on the rocks. The climate is one of despair. But all sorts of grotesque incidents distract from the scene: knocks on the ceiling, an irrelevant quarrel in the corridor. Rocamadour is agonizing. But nobody wants to rock the boat. Everybody, including, notably, the author, looks the other way.

Throughout all this—battered, bankrupt, demoralized—Oliveira continues his search for ultimates. In *Rayuela* the motif of the search is orchestrated at every possible level, including the level of language. Words are a process of elimination. We beat a path toward a distant shore, a sort of ulterior calm in the eye of the storm, a final turn in the thread leading to the center of the labyrinth. Language has a specific function in *Rayuela*: to talk the problem out until it has been exhausted or annulled—or exorcised.

"The whole of *Rayuela* is done through language," says Cortázar. "There's a direct attack on language to the extent, as it says explicitly in many parts of the book, that it deceives us practically at very word we say. The characters in *Rayuela* keep insisting on the fact that language is an obstacle between man and his own deeper being. We

know the reason: we use a language that's entirely outside certain kinds of deeper realities we might gain access to if we didn't let ourselves be misled by the ease with which language explains, or purports to explain, everything." As for the "center" Oliveira touches at the end, "and end that remains undefined—I don't know myself whether Oliveira really jumped out the window and killed himself or simply went completely mad, which wouldn't have been too great an inconvenience since he was already installed in an asylum; he kept switching roles, from nurse to patient, and back, like someone changing clothes—I think that was an attempt on my part to demonstrate from an Occidental viewpoint, with all the limitations and shortcomings this implies, a jump into the absolute like that of the Zen Buddhist monk or the Master of Vedanta."

For Oliveira, common sense has led nowhere. Therefore, to break his mental block, abandoning words, he resorts to acts. But where does this leave the author? Oliveira's acts must be described in words.

"There we touch the heart of the matter," says Cortázar. "There's a terrible paradox in being a writer, a man of words, and fighting against words. It's a kind of suicide. But I want to stress that at bottom I don't fight against words as a whole or in essence. I fight against a certain usage, a language that I think has been falsified, debased, made to serve ignoble ends. It's a bit like the accusation—a mistaken accusation, it turned out to be finally—that was brought against the Sophists in their day. Of course, I have to fight by means of words themselves. That's why *Rayuela*, from a stylistic point of view, is very badly written. There's even a part (Chapter 75) where the language starts to become very elegant. Oliveira remembers his past life in Buenos Aires, and does so in a polished and highly chiseled language. It's an episode that's written fussing over every word. Until after about half a page, suddenly Oliveira breaks out laughing. He's really been watching himself all the time in the mirror. So then he takes his shaving cream and starts to draw lines and shapes on the mirror, making fun of himself. I think this scene fairly well sums up what the book is trying to do."

Language must be of paramount concern to the writer, says Cortázar, in a literature which still demonstrates such glaring lacks in this area as ours does. Our difficulties he attributes in part to the bad influence of foreign translations. The apprentice writer is at their mercy. The language of translations is a landless abstraction, a sort of bloodless jargon that reduces every style to a common denominator. "In a

country where there's a real literary tradition, where literature reflects the evolution of language, as might be the case in Spain, France, Germany or the U.S., there evidently writers work with a sense of inherited responsibility. They have an acute sense of style, a well-trained ear and high formal standards. In Argentina we have none of this." If pompous, labored styles still abound among us, it is because writing, regarded as a performance, imposes a posture. The writer clears his throat, fans out his tailfeathers, and "reproduces on the cultural plane the typical attitude of the ignorant, semi-literate man who, when he sits down to write a letter, finds it necessary to use a completely different language from the one he speaks with, as if he were struggling against some physical impediment, overcoming a series of taboos."

Cortázar's work denounces this false language. He works "against the grain," as he says. Just as he is anti- or para-psychological in his approach to character—that chip in the cosmic kaleidoscope—he is anti-literary in utterance. Morelli, a waggish professor he creates in the appendix of *Rayuela* to give voice to some of his ideas, is speaking for him when he proposes a novel that would not be "written" in the ordinary sense of the word, but "unwritten." We can take this bit of Morelliana as a point of departure for Cortázar, who for some time now has been struggling to devise a "counter-language that will establish new circuits, dispensing with the conceptual baggage and other mental obstacles that hamper true communication."

"The book I want to write now," he tells us, "which I hope I can write, because it's going to be much more difficult that *Rayuela,* will carry this to its final consequences. It will be a book that will probably have very few readers, because the ordinary bridges of language that the reader logically expects will have been reduced to a minimum. In *Rayuela* there are many bridges left. In that sense *Rayuela* is a hybrid product, a first attack. If I manage to write this other book, it will be a positive contribution in the sense that, having concluded the attack I mounted against conventional language in *Rayuela,* I'm going to try to create my own language. I've already started to work at it, and it's no easy task. The ideal would be to arrive at a language that would reject all the crutches (not only the obvious ones, but the other, the ones under cover) and other trappings of what is so cheerfully referred to as a literary style. I know it will be an anti-literary language, but it will be a language. The point is, I've always found it absurd to talk about transforming man if man doesn't simultaneously, or previously, transform his instruments of knowledge. How to transform oneself if

one continues to use the same language Plato used? The essence of the problem hasn't changed; I mean the type of problems that were pondered in Athens in the fifth century before Christ are still basically the same today because our logical categories haven't changed. The question is: can one do something different, set out in another direction? Beyond logic, beyond Kantian categories, beyond the whole apparatus of Western thought—for instance, looking at the world as if it weren't an expression of Euclidean geometry—is it possible to push across a new border, to take a leap into something more authentic? Of course I don't know. But I think it is." The problem is not only to replace a whole set of images of the world but, as Morelli says, to go beyond imagery itself, to discover a new stellar geometry that will open new mental galaxies. Here is where the "figures" come in.

Says Cortázar: "The concept of 'figures' will be of use to me instrumentally, because it provides me with a focus very different from the usual one in a novel or narrative that tends to individualize the characters and equip them with personal traits and psychologies. I'd like to write in such a way that my writing would be full of life in the deepest sense, full of action and meaning, but a life, action and meaning that would no longer rely exclusively on the interaction of individuals, but rather on a sort of super-action involving the 'figures' formed by a constellation of characters. I realize it isn't at all easy to explain this. . . . But as time goes by, I feel this notion of 'figures' more strongly everyday. In other words, I feel daily more connected with other elements in the universe, I am less of an egoist and I'm more aware of the constant interactions taking place between other things or beings and myself. I have an impression of all that moves on a plane responding to other laws, other structures that lie outside the world of individuality. I would like to write a book that would show how these figures constitute a sort of break with, or denial of individual reality, sometimes completely unknown to the characters themselves. One of the many problems that arise in this scheme, a problem already hinted at in *Rayuela*, is to know up to what point a character can serve a purpose that is fulfilling itself outside him, without his being in the least aware of it, without his realizing that he is one of the links in that super-action or super-structure."

In attempting to answer this question, Cortázar will have to bear arms against conventional notions of time and space. Having already denied us ordinary identification with characters and situations, Morelli, in *Rayuela*, goes a step farther. He points to the "error of

postulating an absolute historical time" and suggests that the author should not "lean on circumstance." This is a principle Cortázar has begun to put into practice in a new collection of stories called *Todos Los Fuegos El Fuego* (*All Fires Are Fire*). He can point to a story in this collection that ignores stereotyped time. "A single character lives in Buenos Aires today and in Paris in 1870. One day he's strolling in downtown Buenos Aires and at a certain moment, without any break in the continuity, suddenly he's in Paris. The only person who may be surprised is the reader," he adds. "Covered gallery—a sort of out-of-the-way territory I've always found very mysterious—symbolizes his passage from one place to the other. In France it's winter, in Argentina it's summer, but there's no clash in his mind. He finds it perfectly natural to live in two different worlds (but are they really two different worlds for him?)."

In a sense, this is the crucial point Cortázar has been trying to settle in all his work. No small part of Oliveira's problem in *Rayuela* is the fact that he is a rootless soul inwardly divided between "two different worlds"—a "Frenchified Argentine," as he calls himself. And, "nothing kills a man faster than being obliged to represent a country," the author quotes Jacques Vaché in the epigraph that introduces the first part of the book. Says Cortázar, a man who has learned the problem is not to adapt to a country but to become acclimated in the universe: "I use the phrase ironically, because I think it's obvious from everything I've written that I've never considered myself an autochthonous writer. Like Borges and a few others, I seem to have understood that the best way to be an Argentine is not to run around broadcasting the fact all the time, especially not in the stentorian tones used by the so-called autochthonous writers. I remember when I moved to Paris, a young poet who is a very well-known critic and essayist in Argentina today bitterly reproached me for leaving and accused me of an act that sounded a lot like treason. I believe that all the books I've written from Paris have resoundingly disproved him, because my readers consider me an Argentine writer, even a very Argentine writer. So the quote is ironic in regard to that sort of flag-waving Argentinism. I think there's a deeper way of being an Argentine which might make itself felt, for instance, in a book where Argentina is never mentioned. I don't see why an Argentine writer has to have Argentina as his subject. I think being an Argentine means to share in a set of spiritual and intellectual values, and nonvalues of all sorts, to assume or reject these values, to join in the game or blow the stop whistle; just as if

one were Norwegian or Japanese. It has nothing to do with sophomoric notions of patriotism. In Argentina there continues to be a grave confusion between national literature and literary nationalism which are not exactly the same thing. In any case, the Argentina that appears in my later books is largely imaginary, at least where concrete references are concerned. In *Rayuela*, for example, the Porteño episodes, excluding the few topical references to streets and neighborhoods, are set against a completely invented background. In other words, I don't require the physical presence of Argentina to be able to write."

We might speak of the "metaphysical" presence of Buenos Aires in *Rayuela*. Perhaps that is the key to the whole thing. Buenos Aires, in Cortázar—its gestures, its humor—is not a city but a skyline, a rooftop, a springboard into that longed-for "kibbutz" or nirvana, where differences vanish. Morelli, always useful in a tight spot, agitates for a race of writers who are "outside the superficial time of their era, and from that timeless point where everything is raised to the condition of a 'figure,' where it acts as a sign, not a subject for description, who try to create works that may be alien or inimical to their age and their surrounding historical context, but which nevertheless include this age and context, explain them and ultimately point them on a transcendent course that finally leads to an encounter with man."

"One must travel far while loving one's home," said Apollinaire in a phrase that supplies the epigraph for the second part of *Rayuela*. It gives the essence of the Cortazan adventure. It is one of the forms—perhaps the most personal—of this adventure that Oliveira lives in *Rayuela*. Oliveira is a split personality in pursuit of a multiple mirror-self that forever eludes him. Which is why his plight becomes acute as he wistfully confronts his double, Traveler. He touches parts of a lost self—a vanished unity—in others. The theme of the double, with its infinite variations, is a constant in Cortázar's work. It can take an oneiric form as in the story "La noche boca arriba" ("On His Back under the Night") where a man in his sleep retreads ancestral paths, or again in "Lejana" ("Faraway Image") where a woman on a honeymoon trip in Hungary meets herself coming the other way on a misty bridge, just as she had previously dreamed she would; or serve as the basis for a meditation on immortality as it does in the intellectually more stringent and exacting "Una flor amarilla" ("A Yellow Flower"). Doubles, says Cortázar, are like his "figures"—or, rather, reversing the equation, "the 'figures' are a sort of apex of the theme of the double, to

the extent that they would tend to illustrate connections, concatenations existing between different elements that, from a logical standpoint, would seem to be entirely unrelated."

CORTÁZAR'S ILLUSTRATIONS, always bifocal at least, sometimes take us to odd places, not only mentally, but also geographically. The mental fringes his characters inhabit are faithfully reflected in the marginal settings they frequent. In *Rayuela* we quickly lose our bearings as the scene shifts from a dark corner under a bridge to a mental hospital—in Cortázar a conference hall can suddenly become a urinal—to a circus with a shamanic hole in the tent.

"I like marginal situations of all kinds," he says. "I prefer back alleyways to main thoroughfares. I detest classic itineraries—at every level." An example of this attitude is his hobgoblinish *Historias de Cronopios y de Famas*, which is full of those serious jokes he is so fond of: instructions for mounting a staircase, for winding a clock; a sketch about a man who loses his head and learns to detect sounds, smells and colors with his sense of touch; a section called "Ocupaciones Raras" ("Strange Occupations"), which works its effects under the skin, on raw nerve ends. In *Cronopios* corpses grow nails, the bald drop their wigs. There is a warning against the dangers of zippers. The author is constantly emptying his pockets under the table. When the book appeared in Argentina, it was received with clacking dentures. Poets treated it with respect, says Cortázar, but the few critics who mentioned it were shocked. They deplored the fact that such a "serious writer" could stoop to such unimportance. "There," he says, "we touch on one of the worst things about Argentina: the stupid notion of importance. The idea of doing something just for the fun of it is practically nonexistent in our literature." Cortázar provides a cure for this ill. *Cronopios* came to him like a sudden twinge, a shot in the dark. "In 1951, the year I came to Paris," he tells us, "there was a concert one night in the Théatre des Champs Elysées. Suddenly, sitting there, I thought of some characters that were going to be called Cronopios. They were somewhat extravagant creatures that I didn't see very clearly yet, kinds of microbes floating in the air, shapeless greeenish blobs that gradually started to take on human traits. After that, in cafés, in the streets, in the subway, I started writing stories about the Cronopios and the Famas, and the Esperanzas, which came later. It was a pure game. . . . Another part of the book, 'The Man-

ual of Instructions,' I wrote after I got married, when Aurora and I went to live in Italy for awhile. You have Aurora to blame for these texts. One day, mounting an endless staircase in a museum and out of breath, she said suddenly: 'The trouble is that this is a staircase for going down.' I loved that phrase. So I said to Aurora: 'One ought to write some instructions about how to go up and down a staircase.' " He did. Similarly, in *Rayuela*, he composed a certain circus scene because it served "as a chance to include some elements of humor, of pure inventiveness: for instance, the mathematical cat, which I had a good laugh over."

Oliveira also has a good laugh over it—but it is a hollow laugh, the laugh of a man being led to the gallows. It has the ring of crisis.

Hilarity, in Cortázar, often becomes a sort of seizure. His comic pangs are like death throes. His comic scenes are really brink situations in an almost Dostoievskian sense. *Rayuela* is made up almost entirely of brink situations. Apart from their dramatic effectiveness, they provide the author with strong motor impulses. "For one thing, they heighten reader-interest, which I always keep very much in mind. They're another form of inattention in the book. Besides, I think these brink situations are a kind of displacement for the reader, a way of 'estranging' him. They shake him up a bit, shift the ground under him. But, above all, they are the situations where the ordinary categories of understanding have either collapsed or are on the point of collapsing. Logical principles are in crisis; the principle of identity wavers. Brink situations are the best method I know for the author first, then the reader, to be able to dissociate, to take a leap out of himself. In other words, if the characters are stretched tight as bows, at the point of highest tension, then there's the possibility of something like an illumination. I think the chapter about the wooden board in *Rayuela* is the one that best illustrates that. There I'm violating all the laws of common sense. But precisely because I'm violating those laws by placing my characters and therefore also the reader in an almost unbearable position—it's as if I were receiving a friend sitting in a bathtub in tails and a top hat—at that moment I can really get across what I want to say. What I was trying to say in the chapter of the wooden board is that at that moment Traveler and Oliveira have a sudden complete meeting of minds. Perhaps this is where the notion of the double takes concrete form. Besides, they're gambling for the possession of Talita. What Oliveira sees in Talita is a kind of

image of Maga." It recalls the first image in the book: Maga on a bridge—over a sacred element: water—in Paris. Bridges and boards are symbols of passage "from one dimension into another."

There are other means of passage in *Rayuela*, among them one that turns out to be a descent into Hell. There was already a staircase leading down into neither regions—the hold of the boat—in *Los Premios*. Here the image is more chilling—and specific. Oliveira and Talita ride a dumbwaiter down into the madhouse morgue. Instead of hot coals we have a deep freeze. Oliveira stands clearly revealed in this scene. Toward the end of it, he suddenly kisses Talita. Talita, who is no fool, rushed back to tell Traveler what had happened, complaining: "I don't want to be somebody else's zombie." She has caught on, and "I think the descent into Hell was perhaps the way to create the necessary tension to permit that almost inconceivable moment. Under the circumstances, there could be no misunderstanding. Talita is terrified by what she has just seen in the morgue. She and Oliveira are in a situation of extreme tension, so extreme that right afterwards the whole scene takes place literally on the borderline for Oliveira who returns to his room and starts to set up his system of defenses, convinced that Traveler is going to come and kill him."

Extravagant as ever, Oliveira surrounds himself with a sort of huge spiderweb, made of networks of threads he extends all over the room, hoping Traveler will trip and tangle in them. Pans of water irregularly, but strategically, scattered on the floor fortify the stronghold with a moat. Thus buttressed, Oliveira props himself up to wait on the windowsill. And fate closes in. When Traveler opens the door, he finds Oliveira on the point of throwing himself out the window. Oliveira has just caught sight of Talita-Maga tromping on a hopscotch chart down below in the courtyard. He comes full circle. He has been an inveterate dabbler in deep waters, an "enlightened bum" for whom the first principle of self-respect was not to beg a question, but to do it to death worthily instead. We see him for a moment congratulating himself over his downfall. Who knows what may happen? Breaking down may mean breaking through. His dead end may turn out to be the reverse side of a new beginning. On the other hand, his final loss may be in finding himself.

Oliveira is the creation of an author for whom literature—an act revolutionary by nature—has a high missionary purpose as it functions as an instrument for reform and renewal. And this is why Cortázar says that "as a young man literature for me was the great classics—and

also the best of the avant-garde, let's says the most established names: Valéry, St. John Perse, Eliot, Ezra Pound—the Goethian tradition, we might call it. Now *that* literature interests me a lot less, because I find myself more or less at odds with it. Nobody can deny its remarkable achievements; but at the same time, it's entirely circumscribed within the mainstream of the Western tradition. What interests me more and more nowadays is what I would call the literature of exception. A good page of Jarry stimulates me much more than the complete works of La Bruyère. This isn't an absolute judgment. I think classical literature continues to be what it is. But I agree with Jarry's great 'pataphysical' principle: 'The most interesting things are not laws but exceptions.' The poet must devote himself to hunting for the exceptions and leave the laws to the scientists and the serious writers." Exceptions, says Cortázar, "offer what I call an opening or a fracture, and also, in a sense, a hope. I'll go into my grave without having lost the hope that one morning the sun will rise in the west. It exasperates me with its obedience and obstinacy, things that wouldn't bother a classical writer all that much."

A PROBLEM Cortázar might have to wrestle with—if the sun did suddenly rise in the west for him one day—would be the communicability of this vision. How to transmit it? Would it be something that was "in the air"—that others would also see? One might perhaps assume that if he found the words to express it, he would be telling us something we were already—though wordlessly, incoherently—telling ourselves. He would precede us, but only to make our realization, as it were, simultaneous with his. In *Rayuela* he speaks of an experience that would be latent in every page, waiting to be relived by the reader who would come prepared to discover it as his own.

In this sense, from the point of view of our literature, *Rayuela* is a confirmation. We could say it is our *Ulysses*. Like Joyce, Cortázar, by a sort of inner triangulation, measuring a personal magnitude, has fathomed our world in exile. From his solstice, he has found our equator. It was partly a matter of pinpointing things, he says. A book like *Rayuela*, on the one hand, gives the reader a lot he was already prepared for. "Generally the books that a generation recognizes as its own," says Cortázar, "are those that haven't been written by the author alone but, in a sense, by the whole generation." *Rayuela* is one of those books. It raised blisters when it came out in Argentina. It sold out its first edition of 5,000 copies—editions of 10,000 being considered

runaway best-sellers—in a year. Since then, the mailman has often been at the doorbell, usually with gratifying news. "The mail I've received on *Rayuela,*" says Cortázar, "proves that this book was 'in the air' in Latin America. Many bittersweet letters say: 'You've stolen my novel,' or: 'Why go on writing when my book should have been like *Rayuela*?' Which goes to show the book was latent somehow, and imminent. I happened to be the one to write it, that's all. But that is only one side of the problem. The other side is that, obviously, a significant book also has to contribute something new. There must be a step forward."

And here is where *Rayuela* shines. The "step forward" it offers is a new concept of the literary experience that may come to live a long life in our literature. *Rayuela* is the first Latin American novel which takes itself as its own central topic or, in other words, is essentially about the writing of itself. It lives in constant metamorphosis, an unfinished process that invents itself as it goes, involving the reader in such a way as to make him a part of the creative impulse.

If there is any objection one can raise to *Rayuela,* it is that too much of it functions on the kind of intellectual premises the ordinary reader would be likely to break his teeth on. Its erudition, pursued at times to unnecessary lengths, is intimidating. Oliveira—we gather somewhere in the text—is a frustrated writer. His problems are formulated in what we might call a writer's terms, with a somewhat indigestible wealth of literary allusions. Effects depend heavily on the cultural backlog the reader can call on. None of this seems very intrinsic to the purpose of the book, unless we assume the premise implicit throughout that the writer's or artist's problems, and even the terms in which they are expressed, can be equated with those of man in general. Cortázar argues that in Oliveira he created "a man of the street," as he says, "an intelligent and cultured man, but at the same time perfectly commonplace and even mediocre, so the reader could identify with him without any trouble, and even outdistance him in his own personal experience." Yet Oliveira may well seem out of reach to the ordinary reader. And here is the flaw. But is it that? Cortázar admits that "*Rayuela,* like so much of my work, suffers from hyper-intellectuality. But," he added, "I'm not willing or able to renounce that intellectuality, insofar as I can breathe life into it, make it pulse in every thought and word. I use it quite a bit as a freeshooter, firing always from the most unusual and unexpected angles. I can't and I shouldn't renounce what I know, out of a sort of prejudice in favor of what I merely live.

The problem is to give it new intentions, new targets and points of departure."

In this labyrinthian enterprise he has succeeded beautifully. It has been his way of following the thousand different threads of self that lead toward the center of being. "I think no road is entirely closed to any man," he says. And certainly he has found more than one opening into the farther reaches of experience—an achievement of no small moment for a man who confesses in *Rayuela* to "the somewhat belated discovery" that "aesthetic orders are more a mirror than a passageway for metaphysical longing."

Anything, even to fall back, rather than remain static, has been his motto throughout his career. He allows himself no false reconciliation with himself or the world. "The world is full of people living in false bliss," he says. He will continue to trip himself up as he goes along. The important thing for him is to keep his inner dialogue going. Learning to speak to himself has been his way of trying to talk to others. He has just begun to find his voice. "When all is said and done," he says, "I feel very much alone, and I think that's as it should be. In other words, I don't rely on Western tradition alone as a valid passport, and culturally I'm also totally disconnected from Eastern tradition, which I don't see any particular compensatory reason to lean on either. The truth is, each day I lose more confidence in myself, and I'm happy. I write worse and worse, from an aesthetic point of view. I'm glad, because I think I'm approaching the point where perhaps I'll be able to start writing as I think one ought to write in our time. It may seem a kind of suicide, in a sense, but it's better to be a suicide than a zombie. It may be absurd for a writer to insist on discarding his work instruments. But I think those instruments are false. I want to wipe my slate clean, start from scratch."

LUIS HARSS's book of essays on contemporary Latin American writers, *Ten in Their Times*, will be published in English early next year by Harper & Row. Harss has published two novels, *The Blind* and *The Little Men*, issued in this country by Atheneum. The essay on Cortázar is the third to be published by NMQ and was written in collaboration with Barbara Dohmann who taped, transcribed and assisted in the writing and editing.