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REVIEW ARTICLE

No Need To Worry, Largázar, We Know What Mafalda Would Think of You

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Julio Cortázar, una biografía revisada, Miguel Herráez, Barcelona, Alrevés, 2011, 351pp., €9.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-84-1509-803-4


On 24 February 1952, the 37-year-old Julio Cortázar composed his own epitaph in a short note to María Rocchi appended to a letter to her husband, his life-long friend Eduardo Jonquieré: ‘J. C. Cualquier ranita le ganaba’ (I, 355). Despite measuring just seven centimetres short of two metres tall—hence the Largázar of the playful joke on his name reported by Herráez (108) as dating from his nearly two years in the mid-1940s as a lecturer at the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo in Mendoza—Cortázar had only limited faith in the hopping and jumping powers of his long legs. An unending devotion to the life, work and letters of John Keats led him to remember some lines from one of the letters: ‘Hay que hacer profecías; ellas se arreglan después para cumplirse’ (IV, 257). His foretelling of the words on his tombstone was wrong in a literal sense—they simply

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This special review article was first slated to appear in late 2014 in order to observe the centenary celebrations of Julio Cortázar’s birth. The writer was born on 26 August 1914. In his country of origin, Argentina, a series of exhibitions were held in his honour in 2014. Now, early in 2015, JILAR, together with the reviewer, Stephen Gregory, mark the 100-year anniversary with the publication of the present review article.

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give his name and dates, following the pattern he established two years before, in 1982, for his wife Carol Dunlop’s grave alongside his own (see Herráez 335)—but correct in that his death would be brought about through natural processes, even if, as we shall see later, their exact nature is disputed by some. It is somehow both fitting and sad that Cortázar’s last letter here should regret that the decline in his health prevents him from reading in detail the proofs of a new Spanish edition of Rayuela, for many still his crowning if controversial achievement, allowing the whole five volumes to end with an unintentional but delicate and touching final farewell: ‘Hasta siempre, Felisa, con todo el afecto de tu maltrecho Julio Cortázar’ (V, 638).

There are no doubt many ways of reading the letters, but I read them in parallel with Herráez’s biography and the Álbum biográfico, plus, for the earlier years, the first two volumes of the Obra crítica and, for the period from 1976, the two compendia Nicaragua tan violentamente dulce and Argentina: años de alambradas culturales. I found these additions to the well over 3000 pages of letters essential, and not only as an aide-memoire because, as Bernárdez herself recognises (I, 15), the editors and publishers have not given us a definitive critical edition of the letters included here, although the indices of proper names and works by Cortázar mentioned in each volume are essential tools for a researcher or anyone else searching for specific information that need not entail reading the whole collection. In addition, footnotes by Bernárdez and Álvarez Garriga translate Cortázar’s letters and notes in English and French, and clarify many matters related to Cortázar’s life and work as well as giving details of many essays and books written about him that he often appreciated, annotated and—if in manuscript—returned. For example, the note regarding Carol Dunlop’s decision to keep from him the true diagnosis of the author’s final illness as ‘leucemia mieloide crónica’ (V, 396, note 263) is crucial given the still ongoing debate over whether Cortázar might have been an early victim of AIDS contracted through contaminated blood transfusions in an Aix-en-Provence hospital in August/September, 1981.

Unfortunately, however, the editors do not always elucidate with similar enthusiasm the myriad shorthand or tangential references to people, places or events that for Cortázar’s addressees would not have needed spelling out. Both the Álbum and Herráez are useful for explaining who is who, especially in the early years, while a copy of Territorios can help with the frequently gnomic references to artists that Cortázar admired enough to write about. But I still do not know who the ‘cronopio y amigo’ (V, 36) Harry Marcus was, although according to Cartas V he received numerous postcards in the later years of the author’s life; neither do the letters make it clear what Cortázar did with the ‘rancho’ at Saignon (Herráez informs us on page 306 that it was ceded to Ugné Karvelis), only that he decided never to return there after the rocky and occasionally vicious separation from her in 1977 (V, 86–87). Similarly, the long and unusually close and affectionate epistolary relationship between the author and his publisher Francisco ‘Paco’ Porruá at Editorial Sudamericana peters out without explanation in July 1975 (IV, 507–8), and the reader must wait until a letter to his mother on December 14, 1982 and a postcard to Aurora on 31 May, 1983 (V, 539 and 584) to infer that this friend and colleague had for reasons unknown moved to Barcelona in the interim, while the Álbum biográfico shows us by accident that he established his own publishing house there (25).

Cortázar’s habit of retaining few copies of letters written and almost none of those received after he had replied to them (I, 18) occasioned gaps in the three-volume edition published in 2000. Some of these lacunae have been filled over time as editorial policy changed, addressees decided to make public what they had kept to themselves (Herráez occasionally quotes letters not yet offered to the editors of Cartas) and undiscovered
letters appeared in significant enough numbers to justify this further expanded 2012 edition, which includes over a thousand new items (I, 17). In addition, it returns to their chronological position in the whole body of correspondence Cortázar’s letters and postcards to the Jonquièr family written across nearly the entirety of his adult life and published separately by Alfaguara in 2010, those to María Mercedes Arias written between 1939 and 1945 and the selection to friends and colleagues, mostly in Cuba, scattered throughout the July-October 1984 homenaje issue of Casa de las Américas. Gaps remain, of course. For example, Andrés Amorós, who annotated and introduced the indispensable Cátedra edition of Rayuela in 1984 (in its 23rd reprinting at my last sighting of it), described by Herráez (331) as ‘un amigo, sobre todo epistolar’, is unrepresented. However, by far the most noticeable of such omissions is the lack of intimate letters to either of his wives, although there are early letters to both before acquaintance and friendship turned into affection and love (to Aurora before she followed him to France in 1952 [I, 282, 292, 302, 312] and to Carol after their first meeting in Montreal [V, 93–5], and then again, and frequently, to Aurora after their separation and divorce when they remained friends in close contact, and increasingly so with Carol’s illness and death in 1982 and his own rapidly deteriorating state through 1983, when she came back into his life as all but full-time carer. In contrast, there are no personal letters to Ugné Karvelis at all. This discreet silence may be due to Cortázar’s own wishes: he regretted but understood the selective quotation of his correspondence in an article in 23 April, 1982, as part of yet another attempt to sort out the perpetual misunderstandings in Argentina surrounding his expatriation and exile although ‘no me gusta que se publiquen cartas privadas’ (V, 470), while Peri Rossi quotes him as writing to her in an uncollected letter of 12 July, 1981 that her own ‘resistencia a publicar la correspondencia íntima’ between the two of them was reciprocated by his belief that ‘lo que se escribe y se envía privadamente no debe ser publicado con la frescura con que suele hacerlo mucha gente’ (Peri Rossi, 79). Similar but perhaps even more painful preferences may explain the fact that the last letter to his mother given in the Cartas is 11 October, 1983 (V, 615–6), when Cortázar, though weak and seriously ill, had nearly six months still to live and continued writing to others fairly regularly if briefly until Christmas.

As we have already made use of all three biographical titles under review, I shall devote a little space to them now, before exploring the letters any further. The Álbum biográfico (49) quotes Cortázar’s own somewhat sceptical assertion from the introduction to his 1953 Edgar Allan Poe translation that any biography is ‘un sistema de conjeturas’ and that all systems are ‘sustituibles’ (49), a contention about the genre’s inevitable inconclusive and provisional nature amply demonstrated by the Herráez work, which had been extensively revised in 2010 after its debut in 2001 and subsequent reprints (10), and will now require further revision as it relies heavily, especially in the later chapters devoted to the second half of Cortázar’s life, on the now outdated three-volume set of the letters. Incidentally, among the photos of the covers of 18 biographical works devoted to all or part of the author’s life, the cited page of Álbum includes that of the earlier edition of Herráez, as well as Peri Rossi’s 2001 brief life in the ‘Vidas Literarias’ series for Barcelona’s Ediciones Omega, pages 9–81 of which, unchanged, constitute the first half of Julio Cortázar y Cris under review here. It is worth adding that about a third of the titles pictured are wholly or primarily concerned with recovering Cortázar’s pre-Paris years, before Julio Denis or Julio Florencio Cortázar became the Julio Cortázar we all think we know.

Herráez begins with a rather self-conscious prologue with the author walking through streets in Paris once frequented by a striding Cortázar on his way to conversations first
with Aurora Bernárdez, Cortázar’s first wife and, after his death, the executor and administrator of his literary legacy, and then Julio Silva, sculptor and artist and one of the author’s most faithful friends and collaborators, and I worried at first that Herráez might end up imitating too closely the features that made Cortázar’s Keats book unpublishable. Fortunately, however, the author quickly slips into a personable, informal and dispassionate tone to narrate a life that, while making pertinent if uncontroversial comments on the works, is much more than just a literary or intellectual biography. Herráez shows great skill in summarising the political and historical context of the four Latin American countries most important to Cortázar’s literary and ideological development (Argentina, Chile, Cuba and Nicaragua), as well as France at crucial moments (for example, early 1950s Paris when Cortázar started living there, the 1968 insurgency and the Mitterrand presidency). One readily understands why Sergio Ramírez, Nicaraguan novelist and former Sandinista vice-president, consented to write a prologue for this book. Nevertheless, my conviction on finishing it was that Cortázar’s life and death merit a Richard Ellmann, a Michael Holroyd or a Gerald Martin to do much more extensive research (in Cuba and Nicaragua, but also with full use of the Cortázar archives at the Universities of Poitiers and Texas at Austin, as well as the new letters), to produce something more like a definitive biography of twice Herráez’s number of pages.

Berna´rdez and Álvarez Garriga’s Julio Cortázar: Un a´lbum biogra´fico could not have a more perfect cover photo on its dust jacket: Cortázar sits on a seawall staring more or less in the direction of the camera while behind him, a teenage boy is running along the wall from right to left. The essential point is that, at the moment the shot was taken, the boy appears to be leaping spontaneously out of Cortázar’s back like a youthful spirit yearning for freedom from the prison of its older self’s limitations. Nothing could capture better the playful, devilish, at times even childish, younger wraith that Cortázar valued and cultivated in himself, expressing it in the letters frequently (often near his birthday on August 26) up to his sixties and, as has been long recognised, in the ludic, experimental aesthetics that accompanied both his search for the elusive decentred centre or ‘kibbutz del deseo’ (Rayuela, chapter 36, 223–37) and his utopian socialist politics. In contrast to a chronologically ordered biography (as Herráez’s account inevitably is), the Álbum biográfico is organised alphabetically in order of initial letter of topics selected through the editors’ assessment of their relevance to the author’s life and work. This method approximates much more closely, as they admit (Álbum, 7), the arbitrariness prized by Cortázar’s anarchic spirit and practiced in his ‘libros-collage’ or ‘libros-almanaque’ like La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos, Último Round and Los autonautas de la cosmopista (some would add, 62: novela para armar), and the already mentioned baggy shaggy monster that was Imagen de John Keats. The tension between form and content in such books, often frustrating or boring for readers seeking a page-turning narrative, is for both author and like-minded reader an inexhaustible fund of constant surprise and creative play (hence the multiple approaches offered from the outset in Rayuela).

Consequently, although obliged in its printed form to have a first and last page, the Álbum can be used or plundered haphazardly as you might a dictionary or encyclopaedia, as readers move to and fro between what so happens to be contiguous to a page they are on, or jump across whole sections of the book in search of matters or names that are thematically related. Either way, they will come across gems they have never seen before, as the Álbum is made up of hundreds of images, colour and black-and-white photos of people, objects, life documents and possessions, facsimiles of hand- and type-written texts, some of them previously unpublished (see, for example pages 12, 16, 100, 106–7, 184, 219, 256, 270, 273–74). Here is another, the entry for ‘Técnica’, called ‘Para una
técnica de relato’, reproduced in print and as handwriting facsimile: ‘Empezó a llover afectuosamente. Les sirvieron la cena, lisa y limpita. Al rato, los dos estaban como espejos. Nada pasaba en el muro que no rebotara y se hiciera gesto, risa, pavoneo, mohín, rascarse la cabeza, aceituna rellena’ (Álbum, 278), a minirrelato that could almost double as a perfect haiku. Any assiduous reader of Cortázar may have a compendium of favourite images and fragments in their head, but it takes the authority of Bernárdez and Álvarez Garriga to access the resources needed to ‘armar’ one as good as this. Even readers who have over the years read everything by and about Cortázar they could lay their hands on (for whom he has become part of their own private mythology of nostalgia) will find something they have forgotten, lost or never seen. Alternatively, others could start with the minirrelato; as with the youth running by in the dust jacket photo, there is no knowing where they might then end up.

Peri Rossi’s Julio Cortázar y Cris establishes its tone and raison d’être from the opening and closing sentences of its first section entitled ‘Queremos tanto a Julio’:

No fui al entierro de Julio Cortázar. No estoy en la foto. En las numerosas fotos que se hicieron después de su muerte, una lluviosa mañana de febrero de 1984. (Cuántas veces, Julio, habíamos recordado juntos aquellos versos de César Vallejo): ‘Me moriré en París con aguacero, un día del cual ya tengo el recuerdo’. No quise compartir la dudosa complicidad de los precariamente vivos, de los supervivientes. Aborrezco la muerte y los ritos funerarios. (9)

After a few brief pages it ends:

(‘No sé pescar, aunque me gustaría’, me dijiste. En el malecón, había una hilera indefinida de hombre pacientes, con la caña echada y la mirada perdida. ‘Se echa la caña para pensar en otra cosa’ te dije. ‘Entonces, mucho mejor. Porque lo raro es creer que se está donde se está, o se mira lo que hay’, agregaste un poco melancólico). (19)

Less than a hundred pages later, the whole memoir concludes: ‘Por eso, cualquier día, en cualquier momento, nos volveremos a encontrar, porque yo me sé la fórmula de Einstein y vos sos inmortal, como siempre dijiste’ (117). I quote rather more than might be expected in this context because it seems important to establish that this little book is as much about Peri Rossi as it is about Julio Cortázar, and, indeed, was only written because the series ‘Vidas Literarias’ (writers’ lives by other writers) put out by the commissioning publisher, Nuria Amat, a writer friend of Peri Rossi, permitted ‘una especie de crónica de nuestra relación’, a ‘testimonio’ against the erosions of time and bad memory (80–81). In a sense, it can be read as a reply to the poems Cortázar wrote to her,5 reproduced in the original 2001 Spanish publication,6 but only mentioned here,7 though not modestly, as ‘los mejores que has escrito en tu vida’, while making a justifiable case for greater recognition of his poetry overall (79–80). As the above quotations suggest, this slim volume, partly addressed to Cortázar himself in the second person, is an intimate, intense and at times quite moving, pen portrait or sketch of a close relationship, a personal tribute to the writer but also to a heterosexual man and the emotions he aroused in a woman sexually orientated the other way, just as Cortázar’s poems are testament to the frustrations running asymmetrically in the other direction.8

One cannot help wondering whether Bernárdez and Balcells’s rejection of Peri Rossi’s request to republish the poems in her 2014 publication has a different motivation. Leaving aside the already acknowledged shared reluctance by Cortázar and Peri Rossi to make public their personal correspondence (Peri Rossi 79) as well as the mention by the latter that most of Cortázar’s letters to her had gone missing in one of her many moves (102), there are discrepancies between her account of two important matters and that in the extended letters of 2012, a confrontation that could not have been known to Cortázar’s
executors a dozen years earlier. The less difficult of the two involves the Argentine critic Jaime Alazraki. The second and more recently written part of Peri Rossi’s memoir opens with him turning up almost on her doorstep only a few days after Cortázar’s death with not only a photograph of the brutal reality of his gravestone but also with what she felt to be a somewhat disrespectful proposition from the author’s executors for her to open up what they supposed would be her extensive files of correspondence from him. In her grief, Peri Rossi thought all this distasteful as well as contrary to the agreement with her cherished friend, while finding Alazraki himself affected and with mannerisms and accent she saw as clumsy imitations of Cortázar himself (77–79). She was further put off by her memory that Cortázar had mentioned Alazraki and ‘no precisamente en buenos términos’ (77). One can readily accept why she might have been upset by what she experienced as an intrusive, unsolicited and untimely approach by ham-fisted proxy from the new executors, but the implication that Cortázar himself had had doubts about the character of Alazraki contradicts everything there is in the letters regarding him. As we shall see below, Cortázar had regular and continued correspondence with critics from whom he learnt something new about himself or his writing and thinking, and Alazraki was one them. This is clear from the first letter to him here (IV, 564–65, 20 June, 1976)—though evidently far from the first to pass between them—through to the last, a glowing response to his reading of Alazraki’s _En busca del unicornio: Los cuentos de Julio Cortázar_ (V, 581, 19 May, 1983). Not only that, along the way he wrote a reference in support of Alazraki’s application for a Chair at Harvard (IV, 583–84) and recommended him to Ángel Rama as one of the two best candidates to do the long introductory essay to the Biblioteca Ayacucho edition of _Rayuela_ (V, 58–59), congratulating him on being selected: ‘Me llena de orgullo y contento el hecho de que seas vos quien se encarga de prologar la _Rayuela_ de nuestro amigo Rama, nadie lo hará tan bien’ (V, 103). There are so many possible explanations of this inconsistency between Cortázar’s correspondence and Peri Rossi’s memoir that speculation about its causes is idle, but its existence is as clear as it is puzzling.

The more serious of the two discrepancies in Peri Rossi’s account that might have upset Cortázar’s executors enough to reject her request to reprint the poems Cortázar dedicated to her also involves Alazraki, if only tangentially. It is to Cortázar’s repetition of the benign take on his final illness—an allergic reaction to an excessive amount of aspirin—in a letter to Alazraki on 28 September, 1981 that Bernárdez and Álvarez Garriga append the already mentioned editorial note detailing Carol’s decision to hide from her husband the truth about the fatal leukaemia diagnosis of his mysterious symptoms in Aix-en-Provence and its confirmation later in Paris (V, 396, note 263). For her part, in the first part of the 2001 book, repeated in 2014, Peri Rossi states categorically that ‘Julio no tenía cáncer’, and submits that he and Carol died of what was then described as ‘pérdida de defensas inmunológicas’ caused by transfusions of contaminated blood, there existing at the time no more precise diagnosis of what was still an unidentified syndrome (12, italics in the original). She then relates a visit with Cortázar’s blood test results to a doctor friend and poet, Javier Lantini, in November 1983 (the last time Peri Rossi saw him, it seems [112]), where the doctor confirmed that the indications were that Cortázar’s profile was inconsistent with the leukaemia diagnosis (12–13). In the first of the sections of the second half of the book written since his death and not included in 2001, Peri Rossi repeats that Cortázar died of ‘una enfermedad entonces no diagnosticada—SIDA—y transmitida por una transfusión letal’ (82).

There seems little doubt that all this is enough to entitle us to guess that Bernárdez and Balcells would feel they owed Peri Rossi no favours regarding permission to reprint any
However, although her insistence on her view of his final illness is in its own way part of the homage and fidelity she feels he has a right to expect from her and, as important as it is in assessing the import of Peri Rossi's brief memoir, I would not want it to be taken as the defining issue in her feelings regarding Cortázar. Far more eloquent in this regard is her almost horror-tale experience, long after his death, of arriving home to an empty flat only to hear coming from inside the sound of Cortázar's voice reading aloud (93–97). Her book is worth buying for these few pages alone.

As in the six volumes of Virginia Woolf's letters, the five of Cortázar's Cartas make up, in fact if not intention, a kind of autobiography. Volume I covers 18 years (1937–1954 inclusive), by far the longest period in any one of the books, and takes in Cortázar's period as high school teacher in Bolívar and Chivilcoy, university lecturer in Mendoza and administrator with the Cámara del Libro in Buenos Aires, finishing with the first years in Paris, including his stint as researcher of English and French literature on a French Government grant, marriage to Aurora in 1953 and early travels around Europe (unlike Julio, Aurora would prefer Italy to France [I, 521]) and a first return visit to Argentina. From a literary perspective, these years between the ages of 23 and 41 include his first literary translations (especially, his now celebrated and variously republished translation of the Poe stories, completed in May, 1954 [I, 509]), eventual official qualification as public translator and first stints with the UNESCO translation team. They also include his struggles with Keats and how to write about him as Cortázar and not as just one more critic or professor; the parallel pursuit of a career in poetry,12 both as reader—especially Rilke, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and the English Romantics (Shelley as well as Keats)—and as writer, the letters are sprinkled with experiments in verse, many of which would reappear only in the anthology Salvo el crepúsculo that Cortázar prepared but did not live to see published. More importantly for the Cortázar we know, this volume also covers the time of Los reyes, the stories that constitute the collections Bestiario, Final del juego and the earlier La otra orilla (also not reissued till after his death), the novel El examen (again unpublished until 1984) and in 1952 the first real-life Cronopio (Louis Armstrong, although he was born after a Stravinsky/Coeque concert [see III, 508]).

There are several milestones in the letters along this route from aesthete and teacher to translator and short story writer, Cortázar remaining a part-time poet all his life.13 The principal sign in this gradual process, I believe, is a change in signature that occurs during 1943–1944. The dandy-esque persona in the younger Cortázar used the pseudonym 'Julio Denis' to sign not only his first published literary efforts but also letters to younger women he wished to impress, whereas those to men and older women were always signed 'Julio Cortázar', with 'Julio' naturally reserved for close friends and his middle name 'Florencio' included only for official communications. Sometime in 1943 he seems to have decided to abandon 'Julio Denis'. In September and October of that year he still signed letters to Lucienne Chavance du Duprat and Mercedes Arias with this pseudonym (I, 179) and to the former in March 1944 as well (I, 189), but the next to Mercedes on 29 July was signed 'Julio Cortázar' (I, 195) while that to Lucienne on 16 August has simply 'Julio' (I, 198). 'Julio Denis' never appeared again, but its importance remains: forerunner of many doubles to come in Cortázar's trajectory, it was not only a literary disguise but also a public persona in his everyday life.

Other high and low points in these 18 years include the studied aloofness of Cortázar's August 1949 letter to his father, the only one ever written to the man who abandoned the family much earlier,14 which also focussed, it so happens, on what was in a name, his name rather than his father's (I, 291–92); and three deaths of men too young to die in the space of a year—two good friends and his brother-in-law (see I, 160 and a later recollection at
III, 273). They also include his first letters to famous writers (Borges in 1947 [I, 273] and Juan José Arreola and Alfonso Reyes in 1954 [I, 547–51 and 553–54]) and critics he found sympathetic to his way of thinking about literature and life but—an important distinction—who might not always appreciate his writing (Ana María Barrenechea [I, 551–53] whom he clearly already knew).

Volumes II (1955–1964) and III (1965–1968) function, in many ways, as Cortázar’s own chronicle of the most creative and fulfilling years of his life, a period during which he was able to live and work much as he wished. Well-paid work as translators for UNESCO and other international organisations, although an irksome and frequently boring interruption to the constant pleasures of reading, writing and film or art appreciation, allowed the Cortázars to buy an apartment in Paris and a rural summer retreat in Provence as well as offering opportunities for travel to destinations such as India and Africa otherwise difficult and expensive to reach. On other fronts, Cortázar’s Saint Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment in revolutionary Cuba provided an ideological underpinning to his literary endeavours as well as tracing the contours of a utopian socialist politics, even if it required the persecution of homosexual friends there and the opening shots in the notorious ‘Padilla Affair’ in 1968 to refine further for him the libertarian edge he so valued. The only real clouds on these horizons were a slowly gathering crisis in his marriage and the capture and execution of ‘Che’ Guevara in Bolivia in October 1967, at first an added revolutionary incentive but, as it would transpire, really the harbinger of a triumphant counterrevolutionary and militarist backlash throughout South and Central America that would hobble if not entirely ruin much of the rest of Cortázar’s life, circumstances that dominate the last two volumes of the letters.

Literature-wise, these are the years of the stories in *Las armas secretas*, *Final del juego* and *Todos los fuegos el fuego*, three of the four novels published during Cortázar’s life (*Los premios*, *Rayuela* and 62: *novela para armar*), the catchy countercultural *Historias de cronopios y de famas* and the first of the prophetic end-of-the-age-of-print compendia or collage-like ‘libros-almanaque’: *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*. This output is unique among that of Cortázar’s ‘Boom’ colleagues. For all their bold experimentation with the form, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Fuentes and Donoso remain novelists largely in the same way Joyce, Proust, Woolf and Bloch were. Cortázar, on the other hand, like Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) before him in painting and like his contemporary John Cage (1912–1992) in music, used his longer prose works (he continued to explore and exploit the potential of the short story) to anticipate what might happen to serious fiction when the novel as genre no longer had any important questions to ask its readers. It is these concerns that predominate in the most interesting letters in these two volumes, even (and at moments, especially) in those addressed to his friends and colleagues in Cuba. As he put it himself eloquently to critic Néstor Tirri on 4 December 1968:

> Yo sé que no existo en el fondo, que soy un juego de máscaras, el camaleón de mi pequeña alegría keatsiana; a base de resbalar entre entidades más sólidas, de ese juego intersticial, de esa ósmosis a lo axolotl (toda lo que usted ha visto tan bien) ha ido naciendo una obra cuya fuerza, finalmente, habrá sido la de negar toda visión, toda concepción, toda acción en bloque. (III, 659)

Such letters to favoured critics and commentators are an important part of all Cortázar’s correspondence from the time his work begins to attract serious attention with the impact of his first short story collections right up to the last months of his life. In the years covered by volumes II and III of the letters, the principal recipients of his appreciation and comments are Graciela de Sola, Ángel Rama and Jean Andreu of the French literary review *Caravelle*, plus the much quoted and republished reply to a very much pre-*Calibán* Roberto Fernández.
Retamar who had enthusiastically written to Cortázar after reading *Rayuela* that he had never realised that Latin Americans could ‘escribir así’ (III, 562). The Cuban experience illuminates (and eventually will truncate) the letters to Guillermo Cabrera Infante, which are incidentally a tragicomedy of errors on how not to make a film out of a short story, and colours the end of Volume III with the first signs of the Padilla Affair.

But it is the work that takes pride of place here. Fascinating, revealing and not well known are the sequences of letters to Paul Blackburn (friend, poet, translator and for many years Cortázar’s agent in the United States [U.S.]) and Gregory Rabassa, translator of the major novels, because Cortázar’s own experience as literary translator from English as well as the detailed care he habitually devoted to the minutiae of editing and publishing his own work transform them into fine case studies in the difficult creativity of what is usually considered a secondary kind of writing. Fortunately, students of literary translation as well as Cortázar devotees can follow these byways by means of the indices. Similarly, the extensive but often frustrating and at times wasted collaboration with Argentine film director Miguel Antín is a not always encouraging object lesson in the interaction of cinema and fiction writing, while the long sequence of notes, instructions, suggestions and thoughts with his ‘tocayo’ and close friend, artist Julio Silva, offer unique insights into the production of the cover art for the Sudamericana editions of all his books and the collaboration between the two of them on the collage-books for Siglo XXI and the challenges they presented for compositors.

However, the most enthralling series of letters regarding the production of his books is with his publisher in Buenos Aires, Francisco ‘Paco’ Porruá, who also headed a small boutique house, Minotauro (which put out the first printings of *Cronopios*), as well as being friend, advisor, and first reader of his books (after Aurora) and then their custodian at Sudamericana. Paco Porruá evolved a specially close relationship with Cortázar (see also *Álbum*, 203–4), expressed in a partly amusing and partly moving account of the constantly postponed plans for Porruá and his wife to visit the Cortázar in France that were only realised when circumstances obliged the publisher to decamp form Argentina in the mid-1970s. Between 1961 and 1963 Porruá helped solve the problems posed by Cortázar’s demands regarding the form of *Rayuela*: the table of instructions to the reader, the details of the many quotations, the chapter numbers at the top of each page as well as the usual page numbers at the bottom and at the end of each chapter the number in brackets of the next for readers following the ‘lector cómplice’ sequence, as well as a three-way interaction involving both Julios on feasible alternatives for the cover.

Alfaguara’s fiftieth anniversary edition preserves all but one of such solutions. While opting to disappoint some readers, perhaps, by not competing with any of the existing differently annotated editions of *Rayuela*, it improves on the 1963 original with its bigger pages and larger type face, making each page less cramped and the reading of 597 of them much less painful on the eyes. It also includes a short but illustrative selection of extracts from the author’s letters about the novel to a wide range of friends, colleagues, critics and fellow writers between 17 December 1958 and 29 October 1972 (603–27). However, and since this is an ‘edición conmemorativa’, it seems to me a serious omission, Alfaguara have taken no account of Cortázar’s loathing of details of author and title printed lengthwise along the spine so that readers have to crane their necks to make them out (III, 170), and had drawn three diagrams for Porruá during the page set-up process to ensure he was understood and obeyed at the time (II, 348, 370 and 378). It is regrettable that in 2013 the publisher did not see fit to honour the author’s preferences once more.

The 660 pages of *Cartas* III cover only four years, suggesting the intensity and fruitfulness of the mid-to-late 1960s, despite the calls made on Cortázar’s time by both
increasing fame and the need to feel politically useful. Almost inevitably, then, the last two volumes, for 1969–1976 and 1977–1984 respectively, see at first a flattening out followed by a gradually descending slope, but then, after 1979–1980, a rapid and saddening decline. This is not because Cortázar gives up; it is simply that things get the better of him. Even amidst his grief after the death of Carol, his second wife, the plans for politically effective and spirit-restoring journeys, public activities, writing and publishing are interrupted only by the unmistakable signs of the final impact of his own irreversible illness: on December 28, 1983 he could still write to Néstor Tirri that he was ‘lacónico a la fuerza. En marzo nos veremos allá, estoy seguro’ (V, 636). In fact, he would be dead before mid-February, but Cortázar always valued the Sartrian existential capacity for choice (II, 445). Indeed, one of the motivations for all the letters is summed up to Eduardo Jonquière in such terms on 30 July 1952: ‘Yo elijo Europa pero no acepto la lejanía de personas como tú’ (I, 393, italics in the original). Only dying could take away all space in which his and others’ future might be different from their past and writing could help bridge unacceptable distances: ‘Yo me carteo con mis amigos en mis libros, que siguen siendo mi mejor forma de contacto con todo el mundo’ (IV, 169). He repeated this conviction over the years as the all but continuous surfeit of work and lack of time or energy prevented him writing the kind of letter he felt friends deserved: those that could be shared like yerba mate and good, long conversation—he envied a phrase coined by Eduardo: ‘matear una carta’ (I, 403).

The sense of time slipping away—birthdays regularly made Cortázar age-conscious—and of obligations and commitments queuing up to overrun the pleasures of living, loving, reading and writing he craved, was both personal and political. To Graciela de Sola he could write for New Year in 1973–4: ‘son tiempos de ráfaga y multiplicación; no sé cómo vivo aunque todavía sé por qué’ (IV, 416), and to Alazraki on 17 June 1979: ‘Lo extraliterario, ay, me roba demasiado tiempo, pero la culpa es de Videla y Pinochet interalia, y contra eso no puedo hacer más que seguir adelante’ (V, 188). On the personal front, the friendly separation and divorce from Aurora was succeeded by an increasingly tempestuous eight-year relationship with literary agent Ugne Karvelis, from whose alcohol-fuelled jealous rages (see Peri Rossi 48 and Herráez 295) and bitter resentments, the relationship and marriage to the much younger Canadian writer Carol Dunlop would prove a welcome but only too brief liberation and oasis (V, 106–7 and 119). Politically, the period after 1969 was no less stormy. The complexities of the Padilla Affair from 1970 showed Cortázar first defying the Cubans and then changing his mind, only to upset his expatriate intellectual and literary colleagues in Europe (the temporary silence of Fernández Retamar and gradual disappearance of regular correspondence with Cabrera Infante and Vargas Llosa make themselves felt in Volume IV of the letters). Then the military coups first in Chile in 1973 (Cortázar had been close enough to Allende to be at his investiture in 1970) and then his native Argentina in 1976 (he felt less committed to the Uruguayan case, though friends such as Eduardo Galeano and Ángel Rama clearly kept him up to date) engaged him in a physically exhausting and mentally and emotionally draining fervour of anti-military activism that almost stifled his literary creativity. Indeed after Libro de Manuel in 1973, his last novel finished too hastily for over-riding political reasons (IV, 388), he would only produce short stories less intricate than those of the 1950s and 60s (featured in the collections Octaedro, Queremos tanto a Glenda and Deshoras).

Instead, he wrote numerous political articles reproduced in many parts of the Spanish-speaking world through a press agency (V, 114–15), helped put together a Black Book on crimes against humanity in Chile, and created a fake comic Fantomas contra los vampiros multinaciones, designed to popularise the work done with his participation in sessions of
the Bertrand Russell Tribunal and its human rights successors (see IV, 520–21, in a letter to the Tribunal’s secretary on 28 August 1975).

The only really strong counterpoint during these years of anti-dictatorship propaganda was the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. The struggle of its people in a situation of besieged scarcity aroused in Cortázar the positive emotional antidote to his principled and visceral rejection of U.S. foreign policy, exacerbated after the election of Ronald Reagan. As he put it to Jaime Alazraki after his first visit to Nicaragua in November 1979: ‘Siento que mi deber como escritor muy leído es hacer todo lo que esté en mis manos (y eso significa mis manos frente al teclado de la máquina, sobre todo) para ayudar a ese admirable pueblo’ (V, 213). Until his death he would continue to look for ways to raise money for the Sandinista government (see his proposition to Juan Martínez of Spanish publisher Bruguera [V, 234] and a letter to the Swedish Cronopios Club [V, 214–15]), ceding to it the rights to several of his later books and encouraging others to do likewise (for example, Ana María Barrenechea for her edition of the Cuaderno de bitácora de ‘Rayuela’ [V, 459–60]). It was the increased imperialist encirclement of Cuba and Nicaragua in the 1970s that finally convinced Cortázar to relent on his long-held decision not to even visit the United States, deciding that accepting offers from Oklahoma University in 1975 and Columbia in 1980 might widen even further the reach of his political message through his now always much publicised appearances, a motivation he was concerned to clarify to Casa de las Américas editor Roberto Fernández Retamar (IV, 540 and 545).

His frequent correspondence with critics, translators and publishers only increased as the years went by. To those already named must be added Saúl Sosnowski, Evelyn Picón Garfield, Lída Arones de Ameostoy, Rosario Santos (of the journal Review), Saúl Yurkievich ( Cortázar’s eventual co-literary executor with Aurora Bernárdez, and also responsible for negotiating the sale of his papers to Texas University at Austin before his death). Special mention must be made of the long sequence of letters with Jungian critic Ana María Hernández and photographer Manja Offerhaus (later Duncan), with both of whom Cortázar clearly had other than just professional relations. French translator Laure Guille-Batalión became a friend, like Rabassa and Blackburn in English before her, as did publishers Juan Salinas (Alianza), Juan Martínez (Bruguera) and Guillermo Schavelzon (Nueva Imagen in Mexico). The most important additions to the long list of fellow writers to whom Cortázar wrote are Ariel Dorfman (because of pro-Allende and anti-Pinochet connections, as well as a writer’s admiration), Felix Grande (poet and editor of Cuadernos Hispamericanos) and, especially, Cuban novelist and poet José Lezama Lima. Cortázar’s heart-felt where not awe-struck response to the man and his work is clear from his first letter to him in January 1957 (II, 119–20) to notes in late 1976 after his death to his widow (IV, 580) and to María Zambrano in his memory (IV, 591), although the best evidence is his painstaking work on the Mexican Editorial Era edition of Paradiso and later on as go-between for its translation into English by Rabassa, roles illustrated in many letters from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Of these epistles, however, the most important, and no less so for having been widely known for many years, are the long letter/essays composed with the attention reserved for material for publication, precisely because after his first visit in January 1963 the Cuban revolution remained a beacon of light in hard times for Cortázar: ‘la Revolución cubana entraña para mí la entera acepción de las palabras: realidad y esperanza’ (V, 129). Consequently, he wanted his Cuban comrades to be able to use his thoughts on the prickly issue of writing and revolution in Latin America, mostly via correspondence with Roberto Fernández Retamar (III, 412–21; IV, 258–59 and 539–41; V, 126–29) but also to Haydée Santamaría (IV, 261–66). Similarly, with friends and foes alike in Argentina he tried to
clear up misunderstandings around the equally discomforting and polemical topic of his expatriation and, after the 1976 coup, exile from Argentina (V, 312–16 and 382–85), especially when having to rescind his Argentine citizenship after receiving the French one in mid-1981 (V, 366–68). Reading all of these efforts in the chronological and personal context of the rest of his correspondence throws these ideological self-explorations into different and sharper relief. As he put it to Fernández Retamar in 1964: ‘Con ustedes, los cubanos, yo me desnudo como frente al mar’ (II, 562–63) and to the Swedish cronopios in 1980: ‘es bueno saber que cuando se va a Cuba o a Nicaragua, la amistad se abre como una gran flor’ (V, 247).

For Cortázar the political was personal, which is why my earlier comparison with Virginia Woolf is far from superfluous. He shares with the earlier English modernists what is the one overarching theme of all five volumes of his correspondence: not literature, art, truth, beauty and justice (though they are all here in abundance as they were equally for them), but friendship. Which is why I have left it till last, though a separate article would be necessary to do justice to it and its corollary, home (rightly emphasised as a constant by Herráez, page 123) as place for rest, conversation and conviviality as well as creativity. This was the combination always sought in the ever more comfortable (but never luxurious) apartments he rented, then bought, as increased royalties and UNESCO dollars allowed, first with Aurora and then Carol. Yet Cortázar’s homes were not for family but for himself, his companions and their visitors, just as those of poet Jean and Raquel Thiercelin or Claribel Alegría and Bud Flakoll were sources of pleasure or refuge for him at various difficult moments. Cortázar had no children, but those of close friends such as the Jonquières, Sergis, Blackburns and Rebassas were all his ‘sobrinitos’, and Carol Dunlop’s son was welcomed everywhere from Provence to Zihuatanejo. Cortázar was also a son and brother, and whenever he is away from Buenos Aires letters and postcards flow home to mother and sister Ofelia, and after a prompt from her, he obediently ups the frequency of such mail after the Argentine military make it impossible for him to visit home, and buying them a more comfortable apartment becomes his ‘única manera de estar cerca de ustedes’ (V, 126).

Family for Cortázar was a variety of friendship, it seems, and this made a family of his friends. Readers can use the indices to follow the story of his relations with friends almost too numerous to count, if we include those already named from the literary and publishing world. We can search here for the author’s own take on the endings of Rayuela (IV, 244), Libro de Manuel (IV, 458) and on many of the stories, but this reflects our priorities, not his. He was much more interested, say, in ensuring that honesty did not degenerate into offense with Eduardo Jonquière; in repairing the hurt done to Franco-Uruguayan friend Jean Bernabé, whose translations were rejected by metropolitan French publishers; in trying to retain the friendship of pre-Aurora European lover Edith Aron, his preferred German translator until it was proved to him how deficient her German was, and who disappeared from his life for years, only to turn up out of the blue in 1981 because she was in financial difficulties (he helped her out); in attempting just the right mixture of compassion and goading to help poet and friend Alejandra Pizarnik stave off paralysing depressions or madness; in trying to find new experimental drugs for a clearly desperate Paul Blackburn riddled with cancer; in protecting the interests of collaborators, understandably with close friends like Julio Silva, but also of those who helped on the Saignon property in the South of France or checked on his Paris apartment and looked out for his mail when he was away, people who if they were not friends already, frequently became so over time. Herráez (82–84) records the complaints of rejection from those who stopped being Cortázar’s chosen correspondents once his apprenticeship in provincial
Argentina was over, but Cortázar’s defense preceded them. As he had explained to Rosa Luisa Varzilio as early as September 1946: ‘Llega un día en que la distancia ya no aterra tanto como al principio. El corazón humano tiene esas cosas, que no hay que reprocharle demasiado’ (I, 261), and, bored and depressed on a Christmas 1959 visit to Buenos Aires, he wrote resignedly to Eduardo Jonquiére that ‘con muchos de [los amigos] ya hay tanta distancia, tanta agua’ (II, 199). However, if he could tell Jean Bernabé during the same trip that ‘las cartas son siempre un espejo y no un diálogo’ (II, 201), decades later that self-regard could still allow him to quote to Aronne de Amestoy, while he and Carol were staying at ex-wife but constant friend Aurora’s house in Mallorca in July 1979, that “‘No somos nada, pero qué amigos tenemos’. En su conmovedora síntesis, todo está dicho ahí, y es tanto’ (V, 192). Indeed, it was—and in these volumes still is.

On 20 September 1973, in a brief note to Spanish publisher Esther Tusquets excusing himself from writing anything new for a Spanish selection of the Argentine comic strip Mafalda, Cortázar offered her this anecdote for possible use on the back cover: ‘En el Perú, creo, un periodista me hizo numerosas preguntas y entre ellas la siguiente: “¿Qué piensa usted de Mafalda?” Le contesté: “Eso no tiene la menor importancia. Lo importante es lo que Mafalda piensa de mí’” (IV, 399). Readers who have followed me this far already know my immediate reaction to this witty retort. It is this review article’s title. 17

Notes

1. Page references to the Cartas are preceded by the volume number. Those to other Cortázar works and to the Álbum are preceded by the short title, and those to books by others using the author’s surname, except in whole sections devoted to the same book, where—for the sake of clarity—only the page number will be given.

2. Cortázar himself could be humorous about his undisguisable height. He reported a young female compatriot as saying to him at a cocktail party in 1966: ‘Quiero decirle que los argentinos venimos ahora a París para ver dos cosas: la torre Eiffel y Julio Cortázar’, to which he retorted: ‘En realidad vienen a ser la misma cosa’ (III, 353).

3. See Imagen de John Keats, Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1996, which reads as much like a not wholly successful but fascinating experiment in self-writing as anything else. Cortázar described it on 25 October, 1973 as a ‘tentativa de vivir a un poeta por medio de la poesía, escribiendo desde su mundo, leyendo sus admirables cartas como si yo hubiera sido el destinatario, y contestándolas. Ya puedes imaginar el baúl de turco que puede dar eso’ (IV, 406). A minor leitmotif throughout Cortázar’s correspondence is the regret that this exercise in walking with John Keats, as important as he knew it to be in the evolution of his poetics, was unpublishable as it stood. It was permanently removed from a bottom drawer only 12 years after his death; he had always put it back.


7. Peri Rossi’s Montevideo publisher assured me that she had wanted to include the poems again, but that Aurora Bernárdez and her agent Carmen Balcells refused.

8. Three lines from the Cortázar poems sum up the situation nicely: ‘Circundada de amigas me besaste,/yo la excepción, el monstruo,/y tú la transgresora murmurante’, Salvo el crepúsculo, p. 95. The description of himself here as ‘excepción’ and ‘monstruo’ recalls his definition in January 1947 of the monster in Los reyes as ‘lo “fuera de la ley”’, which Teseo, ‘el orden, la ley, el espíritu real’, must destroy (I, 267).


11. For his part, Herráez mentions the AIDS possibility but concludes that on balance it must be dismissed as largely speculation (333–34).
12. The famous essay ‘Para una poética’ (1954) is both a section from the posthumously published *Imagen de John Keats* and a *de facto* quasi-manifesto or outline of an aesthetics of the poem.

13. See the brief anthology *Pameos y meopas*, Barcelona, Ocnos, 1971.

14. For some mostly unflattering speculation on what were the subsequent Cortázar family’s dealings with this man and his putative inheritance, see Eduardo Montes-Bradley, *Cortázar sin barba*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2004.

15. Cortázar remained forever grateful to Borges’s encouragement and solidarity in ensuring the first journal publication of *Los reyes* and the story ‘Casa tomada’, especially because they had never met and would not do so until 1964 (II, 611–12).

16. The already mentioned Biblioteca Ayacucho edition (that has a nearly 100-page introduction, a chronology and bibliography but no notes to the text); the UNESCO Colección Archivos edition that includes omitted chapters, sections of the *Cuaderno de bitácora*, a chronology and bibliography and reprints of numerous critical interpretations, but textual notes that give only variations from the original typescript (happily, the second 1996 hardback edition was, at the time of writing, still available new from the UNESCO online bookshop for just 33.50 euros plus postage!); and, also mentioned earlier, the Cátedra student critical edition by Andrés Amorós, with full notes to the text, as well as useful introduction and bibliography.

17. After completing this review essay, I learnt that Aurora Bernárdez had died at the grand old age of 94 on November 8, 2014. Her help in the preparation of the five volumes of Cortázar’s correspondence would seem to be her final homage to the man she apparently loved all her life. See the heartfelt tribute byMario Vargas Llosa, ‘La muerte de Aurora’, *Búsqueda* (Montevideo), 20 November 2014, p. 34, first published four days earlier in *El País* (Madrid).