

FROM THE EXPERIMENTAL TO EXPERIMENTALISM

Italo Calvino and Julio Cortázar in Paris (1963-1973)

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“I, Jèssica Pujol Duran confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.”

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses a shift in the history of experimental writing during which literary experimentation stopped being circumscribed by the historical avant-gardes and adopted a more democratic, ludic and inclusive approach to the textual experience: what I will term an experimentalism. In order to illuminate this shift I will explore works written in Paris by Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino between 1963 and 1973, including Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963) [*Hopscotch* (1966)], *62: Modelo para armar* (1968) [*62: A Model Kit* (1972)] and *Libro de Manuel* (1973) [*A Manual for Manuel* (1978)], and Calvino's *Le cosmicomiche* (1965) [*Cosmicomics* (1968)], *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969) [*The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1976)] and *Le città invisibili* (1972) [*Invisible Cities* (1974)]. I will also pay special attention to their collaboration, *La fosse de Babel* (1972), as it combines their experimentalisms and is pivotal to the shift I theorise.

I will read this development of the experimental as a product of a history that begins with Émile Zola's *Le Roman Experimental* (1880), through which the novel became a laboratory for social experiment, changing with the emergence of the historical avant-gardes between the 1910s and 1930s, as the experiment focused on language in order to challenge tradition and the establishment. I will offer a revision of Umberto Eco's reading on this shift while challenging his ideas on the open work. This will allow me to undertake a comparative study of Cortázar's and Calvino's experimental writings in Paris, where other new avant-garde groups such as the *nouveau roman* writers were publishing innovative novels and members of the Oulipo were exploring the potentiality of literary constraints. I will, however, contend that the events of May '68 triggered a point of no return for their experimental practices. Influenced by the Cuban revolution, Cortázar developed his revolutionary poetics further, while Calvino continued to play with combinatorial inventiveness, vouchsafing his membership in the Oulipo in 1973. Such a comparison will provide a contextual understanding to these authors' experimentalisms at the same time that will venture a re-examination of its political and critical meanings.

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INTRODUCTION

“By all means be experimental, but let the reader be part of the experiment.”

Max Sebald¹

This thesis focuses on the work of two authors, Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino, who lived in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, and whose work has recurrently been labelled experimental by critics such as R. M. Berry, Brian McHale, Umberto Eco and Maria Dolores Blanco Arnejo. Though much has been written on experimental writing, the conceptualisation of what experimental literature means has only recently begun in earnest, heralded by such publications as Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale’s *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), Gibbons’s *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* (2012), Patricia Suzanne Sullivan’s *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies* (2012) and Julie Armstrong’s introductory guide *Experimental Fiction* (2014). The *Companion* is a first attempt to group a wide range of practices that for different reasons have been labelled experimental throughout the twentieth century. In the Introduction the editors state that experimental literature is extremely diverse because it spans from “[u]nfettered improvisation” to “the rigorous application of rules,” from “accidental composition” to “hyper-rational design.”² This hints at how difficult it is to talk about experimental literature as a homogenous subject, even after approaching its main manifestations in some detail. According to Bray et al., however, all experimental authors share a “commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself,” something that turns out to be “the engines of literary change and renewal” because “it is literature’s way of reinventing itself.”³

¹ “The Collected ‘Maxims’ of W. G. Sebald. Recorded by David Lambert and Robert McGill,” online, *Five Dials Magazine*, Internet, 19 August 2015. Available: <http://fivedials.com/portfolio/the-collected-maxims-of-w-g-sebald/>

² See the Introduction in Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 1.

³ Bray et al. 1.

This conceptualisation is key to the thinking that I will undertake in this thesis. My title includes the word “experiment” in two forms: as “the experimental,” hinting at the reinvention of the “verbal art” that Bray et al. detail; but also as “experimentalism,” because Calvino and Cortázar share a poetics which can be thus defined. I use this “-ism” – a suffix that is normally employed to refer to a doctrine or school of thought – to refer to their poetics, which I read as a more or less organised system with a political dimension. Calvino and Cortázar, but also authors such as Christine Brooke-Rose, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, B. S. Johnson and Georges Perec, lived experimentalism in a similar manner throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In their work, this “experimentalism” is made up of a series of distinctive features, such as a preoccupation with a collaborative reader, a magnified interest in the form of the narrative, the constant intrusion of self-referential moments which act on a metafictional level, and a critique of domination embedded in the form of the narrative, all of which will be discussed in this thesis. But the noun “experimentalism” is also intended to illustrate a historical transformation in the meaning of “experimental writing” that took place in Europe in the years before, during, and immediately after the 1960s, during which period these authors disentangled their experimental practices from those of the shocking and innovative historical avant-gardes, offering various routes out of historical avant-gardism. Therefore my thesis will operate on two levels: on the one hand, it will unveil the common characteristics of the organisation of experimentalism and, on the other hand, it will tackle the historicity of such poetics in their context.

This separation of the avant-garde from the experimental has been explored and established by critics to date such as Vincenzina Levato. For her, the experimental is at the core of all the avant-garde movements, and thus the historical avant-gardes could not have taken place without it; it was a condition for their existence.⁴ But the “experimental” of these authors publishing in the 1960s and 1970s was an “experimentalism” that can exist alone, without the apparatus of a programmatic avant-garde as it did in earlier decades. Levato asserts that “mentre l’avanguardia

⁴ Vincenzina Levato, *Lo sperimentalismo tra Pasolini e la neovanguardia: 1955-1965* (Soveria Mannelli: Yazar, 2002) 7.

letteraria è un fenomeno circoscritto a determinati periodi storici ... lo sperimentalismo si configura come una vena sotterranea che percorre le storie letterarie.” [“while the literary avant-garde is a phenomenon circumscribed to a specific historical period ... experimentalism is formed as an underground vein that runs throughout the history of literature.”]⁵ Levato warns us that venturing a definition of experimentalism “comporta gli stessi rischi di dispersione semantica e di atrofia concettuale di una interrogazione intorno alla questione fondamentale della ‘letterarietà.’” [“involves the same risk of semantic dispersal and conceptual atrophy as to interrogate the fundamental question of ‘literariness.’”]⁶ Indeed, far from providing a definition of experimentalism, the function of my thesis is to illustrate a complexity in literary manifestations of the 1960s-1970s that has been studied otherwise under the labels of late-modernism, postmodernism and the new avant-garde – even a few critics tackle experimentalism as a distinctive Italian movement, *sperimentalismo*, associated with the work of the Gruppo 63 – but rarely under the light of the experimental as a development of Émile Zola’s “experimental novel.”

Zola is the first author to make the connection between the experimental and the literary on a theoretical level. His association triggered a discussion around the conceptualisation of experimental writing that developed through the twentieth century and is still debated today. My aim is to focus on the historical sense of the concept and clarify some of the issues that it leads to in the 1960s, when polemics substantially contributed to the redefinition of the experimental. Bray et al. recall that in the third part of the twentieth century, some “experimental” writers began to express reservations about the category “experimental,” accusing it of “segregating or ghettoizing innovative literature and preventing it from reaching an audience or infiltrating the mainstream.”⁷ They offer the key example of Johnson, who wrote that

“Experimental” to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for “unsuccessful.” I object to the word *experimental* being applied to my own work. Certainly I make

⁵ Levato 7.

⁶ Levato 7.

⁷ Joe Bray et al. 2.

experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems.⁸

Johnson's experiment is thus either dialectical or, at the very least, rather uncomfortable – for while experiment here seems to be reserved only to Johnson's failures, it nevertheless remains integral to his practice. This discomfort about the nature of literary experimentalism, as Bray et al. point out, is typical of this type of writing, and the attempted elucidation of the apparent contradiction that Johnson articulates here is, thus, a dynamic that must be considered by anyone broaching a conceptualisation of experimental literature. Accordingly, the debate set up by Johnson will form a key element of the argument of this thesis.

Therefore my purpose in the chapters that follow is to address this dynamic at the same time that I identify a seachange in the history of experimental writing, at which point the novel as a mass-produced object continues to be the focus of experimentation but also begins to involve a much larger number of readers (or receptors) in the performance of the experiment, a collaboration which – as Sebald indicates in the epigraph – breaks away from the radical projects of the avant-gardes in order to become more metafictional and inclusive. I define this moment as the shift from the experimental to experimentalism, for Brooke-Rose, Cabrera Infante, Calvino, Cortázar, Johnson and Perec were not experimental in the sense of the first avant-gardists; they were experimentalists. In order to reach an understanding of experimentalism, then, I will first outline the history of experimental writing and how the concept developed through the decades of the twentieth century. I will then discuss the terminology that has thus far been employed to address Cortázar's and Calvino's particular experimental writing, before introducing a brief outline of the chapters to come and my associated comparative methodology.

The Development of Experimental Writing

⁸ Joe Bray et al. 2. In B. S. Johnson, Introduction, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973) 11-31, 19.

Experimental writing is at the core of twentieth-century's literature. As an approach to the process of creation, it was adopted from the field of experimental sciences. The French Naturalist, Émile Zola, was the first writer to draw a connection between the experimental methods of the natural sciences and literary experimentation. In 1880 he published *Le Roman Experimental* [*The Experimental Novel*], a centrally important essay in which he attempts an explanation of experimental literature and adapts a methodology that is commonly applied to experimental medicine to the writing of "experimental" novels. Towards this end he paraphrases the work of the physician Claude Bernard in his *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865), drawing parallels between the experience of the pursuit of scientific discovery in the laboratory and the arrangement of characters in a novel. According to Zola, an experimental novel should allow the reader to observe "natural" human reactions and interactions, carefully written in *discours indirect libre*, thus providing us a deeper and more objective understanding of the human being. The experimental method, moreover, would allow the writer to become a quasi-scientist as he/she performs research into human nature, and would thus justify art as an independent institution. Zola believed that an author is not a creator "ad vacuum" but an experimenter, someone who displaces the weight of meaning from him/herself onto the vehicle of the experiment: the novel. Just as the scientist reproduces the laws of nature in a laboratory in order to understand their functions in the wider world, the experimental novelist places the characters of the mass society into fictional situations in order to understand human psychology. According to Zola, then, both the scientist and the novelist work with their material towards the discovery of what is still unknown, and thus their strength lies in their method: "All we do is to apply this method to our novels, and we are the determinists who experimentally try to determine the condition of the phenomena, without departing in our investigations from the laws of nature."⁹

⁹ Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays* (New York: Haskell House, 1964) 36.

It is important to note that Zola was fascinated by modernity, and especially by the emergence of the new, mass society. According to Henri Mitterand, Zola was “le premier romancier ... à faire de la foule un personnage en soi” [“the first novelist ... to make the crowd a character in itself”].¹⁰ The descriptive style that Zola uses in his cycle of twenty novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893), for example, includes characteristic places and objects of modern life – such as the machine, the mine, the market, the train, the shops and the city – which are described in detail as symbols of modernity.¹¹ Nevertheless, Zola was not trying to create an analogy or a useful metaphor of the new French quotidian, but approaching the novel as what he believed to be a new field of research in human sciences. Thus, on the one hand, his characters are physiological types playing roles in those modern scenarios; roles that determine their interactions as if they were ingredients for a laboratory experiment. On the other hand, the author disappears because the novel creates a world of truth that operates according to its own rules.

In his “Preface to *Miss Julie*” (1888) the Naturalist playwright August Strindberg takes Zola’s experimental approach to its ultimate consequences, presenting a love story between a daughter of an aristocrat and her father’s valet as entirely “deterministic;” a wholly scientific exemplum of abstract psychological principles, perceived through an openly positivist lens – in the sense that society operates under certain laws and sensory experience is the source of knowledge. In his essay Strindberg takes his assumptions (which include the superiority of men over women and the dangers of social fluidity) as empirically established truths, determined through experiment in the laboratory of his dramaturgy. Tullio Pagano argues that “[c]onflicts between the characters emerge as the product of a combinatory process in which social relations and hereditary or biological attributes shape their subjectivity and, to a great extent, determine the development of

¹⁰ Henri Mitterand, *Zola: l'histoire et la fiction* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) 8.

¹¹ Nelson 6.

the plot.”¹² Paradoxically, this experimental method brings the artificiality of the creative process to the surface, which is the opposite of what the word “Naturalism” implies.¹³ Strindberg’s experimental play is not just a mechanism to confirm an ideology that secludes representation within a hegemonic discourse, but also, as Pagano suggests, “a medium through which the mechanisms of domination are put to the test and eventually exposed”¹⁴ – a mechanism which is made through the gesture of the famous “Preface.” Therefore the Naturalist notion of experiment, even though it follows the principle of impersonality – with the author allowing the events to unfold in a “natural” way – implies, nonetheless, the “active intervention of the author, who intervenes to direct the conflicts toward a certain outcome.”¹⁵ Although the withdrawal of the author is intended, the disappearance is not effective because the author/narrator can be detected in the mechanism of the novel. Indeed, from today’s historical perspective it is obvious that this positivist approach not only justifies and perpetuates social injustice (thus disproving Strindberg’s strident claims for objectivity), but also places art in a profoundly ambivalent position, challenging its expressive functions and posing questions about its validity. Brian Nelson agrees that Zola – in a judgement that can be applied to all Naturalist writers – was “a typical product of his times,” the proof of which was “his acceptance of scientific determinism.”¹⁶

While Zola introduced the language of “experiment”¹⁷ to literary criticism, we can detect certain precedents. Although not directly “experimental,” during the sixteenth century Michel de Montaigne termed his new prose *essais* (in the sense of “try-outs”).¹⁸ In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, novels like Miguel de Cervantes’s *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605-1615) and Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767),

¹² Tullio Pagano, *Experimental Fictions: From Émile Zola’s Naturalism to Giovanni Verga’s Verism* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999) 15.

¹³ Pagano 15.

¹⁴ Pagano 17.

¹⁵ Pagano 17.

¹⁶ Nelson 3.

¹⁷ Bray et al. 2.

¹⁸ Bray et al. 2.

became later labelled “experimental.”¹⁹ But the model of scientific experiment does not become linked to literary innovation until Zola, and after that, the ground-breaking writing of the avant-garde authors, who adopted the term and changed its meaning “to associate [it] with qualities of shock and affront, iconoclasm and difficulty,”²⁰ transforming that scientific determinism into cultural and political activism. The activation of anti-art movements, especially Dada, which occurred simultaneously with the outbreak of the First World War, condemned the Naturalist approach to reality. In a Europe in crisis the scientific experiments of the Naturalists were no longer useful for the understanding of modern society. The truth was quite the opposite, in fact, for amidst the brutality and inhumanity of the war the Dadaists had uncovered a false determinism and that art was now a severely deteriorated institution. For Dada aesthetics were pushed into the background, allowing chaos and irrationality to take prominence. They wanted to destroy that dated rationalism and, thus, free art from its institutional chains, bringing it back to real life and to social praxis: “[t]he avant-garde,” states Peter Bürger, “intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life.”²¹ In the early 1920s the Surrealists, following the ideas of Dada, turned the meaning of experiment into a systematic search for the surreal. The Surrealists understood reality as a burden of inherited Western-European conventions that obstructed an access to a more complex and wholesome dimension of the real, one that is as yet unknown. For them, then, the purported positivism of the Naturalists only reproduces a false conception of human nature, leaving them to perform their experimentation with their own minds and personalities, in order to move towards further representations.

¹⁹ Some examples of critics who refer to Cervantes and Sterne as experimental writers include Ottmar Ette, *Literatura en movimiento*, trans. Rosa María S. de Maihold (Madrid: CSIC, 2008) 63; Elizabeth Dipple, “Iris Murdoch and Vladimir Nabokov: An Essay in Literary Realism and Experimentalism,” *The Practical Vision: Essays in English in Honour of Flora Roy*, eds. Jane Campbell and James Doyle (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978) 104; and Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 55, just to name a few.

²⁰ Bray et al. 2.

²¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 53-54.

The Dadaist and Futurists²² in the 1910s, and then the Surrealists in the 1920s directed their experimentation towards language itself. They regarded language as the material that organises our reflections about and onto the world. A true revolution, then, would involve freeing that material from its established and traditional meanings. They wanted to renovate language, to bring it back to live experience in defiance of the anaesthetised tonalities of official language and Naturalism. Their political struggle was also inseparable from their aesthetic revolution, as experiment was not something detached from the author, taking place in a sort of neutral laboratory, but a particular manner of consciously manipulating such artificial materials in order to trigger change. Linguistic material had to be, then, distorted and pushed to its limits in order to discover other realities. Far from acting like scientists, then, avant-garde artists developed a new role, one closer to social life, for they held the responsibility of provoking change. John Barth agrees that the problem of the historical avant-gardes was mostly a problem of language as a medium of literature.²³ The avant-gardist writer could no longer pretend to be a scientist; language was a construction and the only possible experiment was to transgress its structural logic. Therefore they had to be revolutionary, collapsing those “false” constructions and creating new worlds through sudden, surprising and destructive acts, although that aim, contrary to their expectations, would end up proving as utopian as positivism.

Various critics have contributed to the understanding of the avant-garde. Renato Poggioli, Matei Calinescu and Peter Bürger provide valuable approaches to its origins, developments and contradictions. Calinescu, in *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987), centres on the relativistic character of modernism, of which the avant-gardes became its rebellious manifestations. He links the avant-garde with romantic utopianism because of its revolutionary ethos, which I will address in

²² The Futurists were the closest to Zola’s ideas due to their connections between scientific experiment and literary experimentation. In order to find out more information about the Futurist’s connection with science see John White, “Italian Futurism and Russian Cubo-Futurism” in Bray et al. 21-35.

²³ John Barth, *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984) 199.

Chapter 6, when I discuss Cortázar's socialism.²⁴ Poggioli also reads Romanticism as precedent of the avant-gardes in *The Theory of the Avant-garde* (1968), and talks about a historical split between the avant-garde as an "alliance of political and artistic radicalism"²⁵ mostly associated with French language and culture, and a notion of the avant-garde as "exchange currency" that accesses "the international market of ideas."²⁶ Thus, for Poggioli, after that divorce, "the political notion functioned almost solely as rhetoric and was no longer used exclusively by those faithful to the revolutionary and subversive ideal."²⁷ Calinescu finds this divorce "unacceptable"²⁸ because, according to him, the term is more complex and diverse. In American criticism, for example, avant-garde and *modernism* are sometimes interchangeable; in Spain "*vanguardia*" becomes the opposite of "*modernismo*," while in Italy they make a distinction between the historical avant-garde and the "*neo-vanguardia*."²⁹ Indeed Calinescu's emphasis on the complexity and diversification of the term helps to demarcate my own use, which, following his reading, would correspond to the Italian division between the historical and the new avant-garde. Bürger, in *History of the Avant-garde* (1984), also separates the historical from the new avant-garde, and comes to the interesting conclusion that that division brings to the fore the inability of the historical avant-gardes "to destroy art as an institution."³⁰ For Bürger, the history of the historical avant-gardes is a history of failure, for they never accomplished their objective of liberating art from the bourgeoisie. However, the struggle was not wholly in vain, as, according to Bürger, "they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity."³¹ Indeed, after the Second World War, which precipitated the end of the historical avant-gardes, no artistic school or movement was able to successfully return to the deterministic

²⁴ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 95-96.

²⁵ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968) 12.

²⁶ Poggioli 13.

²⁷ Poggioli 13.

²⁸ Calinescu 113.

²⁹ For more information about the complexity of the term see Calinescu 118.

³⁰ Bürger 87.

³¹ Bürger 87.

dynamics of the Naturalist writers, as a single and univocal truth had ceased to be attainable (or even desirable). This change, in fact, also affected the meaning of experiment in literature, which broke away from that more radical discourse of the historical avant-gardes to open up to more democratic, international and inclusive political understandings.

During the 1940s and 1950s various newly flourishing groups with interesting revolutionary ideals who called themselves “the last avant-garde movement” or “the new avant-garde” wanted to replace the void left by the historical avant-gardes.³² The artists of the group COBRA (standing for *Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam*), for instance, and also the writers of the French *nouveau roman* and the Italian Gruppo 63, were willing to re-enact or revitalise the corpses of the historical avant-gardes. However, Bürger argues that this new avant-garde’s re-enactment of the political and social protest of the historical avant-garde (that of the 1910s and 1920s), in fact, had a rather negative outcome at the time since “procedures invested by the avant-garde with anti-artistic intent [were] being used for artistic ends.”³³ The new avant-garde, according to Bürger, institutionalises the avant-garde as art, making it autonomous, “which means that it negates the avant-gardiste [sic] intention of returning art to the praxis of life.”³⁴ For Bürger, then, the fact that the aim of the new avant-garde was only artistic and not political made their protest “inauthentic.”³⁵ This does not, however, mean that their work is not of aesthetic quality, or that notions such as “new” and “authentic,” as I will illustrate in Chapter 3, were themselves in crisis. In fact, what Bürger does not come to terms with is that, actually, after failing to return art to social life, the very term avant-garde became ahistorical, normally used to refer to those artists whose work is considered to be, for one reason or another, ahead of its time. Indeed Brooke-Rose, Cabrera Infante, Calvino, Cortázar, Johnson and Perec, despite finding themselves in the

³² For more information about the grouping of Northern European avant-gardes, see “The Low Countries. Art and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands,” *Jaargang 1* (Rekkem: Stichting Ons Erfdeel, 1993-1994): 69; online, *Digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren*, Internet, 4 February 2015. Available: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_low001199301_01/_low001199301_01_0010.php

³³ Bürger 58.

³⁴ Bürger 58.

³⁵ Bürger 53.

midst of the turmoil around the new groupings, did not openly ascribe their work to the new avant-gardists but they were still regarded “experimental,” and even “avant-gardist.”

Additionally, where Bürger sees a meaningless return to the historical avant-garde, Barth envisages a meaningful new representation of modernity. In “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) Barth notes that there is in the writing of the 1960s an unprecedented sense of exhaustion. This exhaustion is important for my thesis, as it does not stand for tiredness or weariness, but for a “used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities – by no means necessarily a cause of despair.”³⁶ Barth sustains that the democratic artist of the West revolts against the aristocratic notion of *techné* (in its Aristotelian sense), because the idea of a controlling artist “has been condemned as politically reactionary, authoritarian, and even fascist.”³⁷ Thus we are not confronted with the writer-scientist of the Naturalists, or with the writer-revolutionary of the historical avant-gardes, but with a writer who regards form as something that has been exhausted, and whose only prospect is to juggle with the debris.

Calvino’s and Cortázar’s Experimentalisms

As I stated at the beginning of this introduction, I will focus my analysis on two of those authors whom I believe to be especially representative of this type of experimentalism: Italo Calvino and Julio Cortázar. Some critics, including McHale and Barth, situate Calvino’s and Cortázar’s writings at the boundary between modernism and postmodernism.³⁸ Barth, for instance, in “The Literature of Replenishment” (1979) lists Cortázar and Calvino as postmodernist authors alongside the Americans Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Thomas Pynchon,

³⁶ Barth, *The Friday* 64.

³⁷ Barth, *The Friday* 65.

³⁸ Some examples include: Constance Markey’s *Italo Calvino: A Journey toward Postmodernism* (1999); Alessia Riccardi’s “Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity,” *MLN* 114.5 (Dec., 1999) 1062-77; Kristi Siegel’s “Italo Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*: Qfwfq’s Postmodern Autobiography,” *Italica* 68.1 (Spring, 1991) 43-59; McHale’s “Telling Postmodernist Stories,” *Poetics Today* 9.3 (1988) 545-571; Santiago Juan-Navarro’s “Postmodernist Collage and Montage in Julio Cortázar’s *Libro de Manuel*” in Jaime Alazraki’s *Critical Essays on Julio Cortázar* (New York: G.k. Hall & Co., 1999) 173-192; and Maarten Steenmeijer’s “*Rayuela* de Julio Cortázar: Novela (pos)modernista,” *Neophilologus* 79.2 (1995) 253-262.

and Kurt Vonnegut.³⁹ Barth states that Calvino began as a new-realist writer in Italy and developed into “an exemplary postmodernist” in Paris, with the publication of some books that I will study in this thesis: *Le Cosmicomiche* (1965) and *Ti con zero* (1967) [gathered as *The Complete Cosmicomics* (2009)]⁴⁰, *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969) [*The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1976)] and *Le città invisibili* (1972) [*Invisible Cities* (1974)].⁴¹ McHale argues that Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963) [*Hopscotch* (1966)] falls into the category of late-modernism because the novel “does not in fact alter the order of events.”⁴² On the contrary, *62: Modelo para armar* (1968) [*62: A Model Kit* (1972)], Cortázar’s following novel, is a postmodernist novel because it “foregrounds fiction’s ontological structure, and thus lays bare the process of world-building.”⁴³ Drawing from the postmodernist theorists Ihab Hassan and Robert Alter, Barth defines postmodernism as fiction that “merely emphasises the ‘performing’ self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy.”⁴⁴ Certainly, most of the works by Calvino and Cortázar that I will analyse are more about themselves and their processes than “about objective reality and life in the world.”⁴⁵ However, the conceptual critical mapping of “postmodernism” will only prove peripherally relevant to my approach because, rather than disclosing their postmodernity, I mean to produce a close reading of their experimental poetics, attending to the complex contextual political and literary specificities of the period. These two authors are not wholly avant-garde, truly realist nor unequivocally postmodernist, but transnational authors who lived in Paris throughout the 1960s and 1970s and shared a similar experimental approach to their writing. In fact I delimit my study to the decade between 1963

³⁹ Barth, *The Friday* 195.

⁴⁰ Both translated by Weaver (*Ti con zero* firstly under the title *Time and the Hunter* in English). Later on the Club degli Editori published a compilation of cosmicomics, *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968), in which they added *Ti con zero*, and Garzanti compiled the old and new cosmicomics in Italian in *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984). Mondadori gathers them in *Tutte le cosmicomiche* in 1997, and Penguin publishes the translation, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, in 2009. I use the later publication in English.

⁴¹ Barth notes, however, that in *Invisible Cities* Calvino sometimes shifts to modernism but does not expand on the statement. *The Friday* 196.

⁴² McHale, *Constructing* 253.

⁴³ McHale, *Constructing* 253.

⁴⁴ Barth, *The Friday* 200.

⁴⁵ Barth, *The Friday* 200.

and 1973 because it was in 1963 that Cortázar, already settled in Paris, published his first major experimental novel, *Hopscotch*; and it was in 1973 that he published his last major novel *Libro de Manuel* [*A Manual for Manuel* (1978)], also in Paris. Calvino moved to the city in 1965 and also published his most experimental works in 1965, *Cosmicomics*, and 1972, *Invisible Cities*. This decade thus provides a sample of the work of these two authors living in Paris and publishing in their native-language there while exposed to the experimentalisms of the new French avant-garde and developing a personal and professional relationship.

In addition, during this decade Paris was experiencing something of a re-enactment of the historical avant-gardes, with the advocates of the *nouveau roman* drawing upon the strictures of the historical avant-gardists while animating a new generation of readers. Despite the importance of the historical avant-gardes for their own poetics, however, both Calvino and Cortázar reacted against that contemporary re-enactment. Their experimental methods, in truth, broke away from other closed and organised forms of the period, forms that were attached to the preceding or historical avant-gardes in quite different ways from theirs. Bringing these two authors from different nationalities (Argentina and Italy) writing in a third country (France) in their own languages together will initiate questions about exile and experimentalism, but also about translational, multilingual and heterogeneous experimental practices that were flourishing in capitalist Western Europe at that time. My aim, then, is to contend that, even though their political and aesthetic commitment was different from that of the historical avant-gardists, they took on the linguistic experimentation of the historical avant-gardes, and sought a form and a reader that better suited the social and political instability of their own time.

Throughout his career Cortázar never abandoned an interest in the historical avant-gardes that preceded the Second World War, in particular Surrealism and Existentialism. Even before writing *Hopscotch*, he published articles in which he reflected on the impact that those movements had had – and were having – on the contemporary novel, at the same time as foreseeing new directions for the post-war writers of the 1950s. Such sentiments are expressed in essays such as

“Notas sobre la novela contemporánea” (1948), “Irracionalismo y eficacia” (1949) and “Situación de la novela” (1950). It would not be until 1963, however, that a materialised personal reinvention of those experiments came to life in *Hopscotch*. In this novel we encounter a tension between the early twentieth-century avant-gardist praxis that nurtured Cortázar’s early essays, and a more contemporary preoccupation of the author with the representation of modernity since his move to Paris in 1951, and which is symptomatic of the experimentalism that I will address in my thesis. A few of Cortázar’s critics have focused on the meaning of Cortázar’s experimentalism. Lida Aronne Amestoy, Graciela de Sola, Ana María Barrenechea and Juan Carlos Curutchet, for example, make use of the aforementioned terminology. De Sola, in *Julio Cortázar y el hombre Nuevo* (1968), highlights Cortázar’s formal and linguistic experiments, insisting on his Surrealist inspiration. De Sola claims that *Hopscotch*, for example, has the character of a “work in progress”⁴⁶ due to the elasticity and endless possibilities to produce stories; it is an unfinished book, whose parts can be interpolated at the reader’s will thus creating different narratives. She also connects it to the ideal of the “antinovel,”⁴⁷ an important concept among the *nouveau roman* writers of the period. The term was coined by Jean-Paul Sartre and used by writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute. In his logbook Cortázar envisages the writing of *Hopscotch* as experimental, and the novel as an antinovel.⁴⁸ Morelli, the character who performs the role of avant-garde writer in *Hopscotch* explains: “hay que escribirla como antinovela porque todo orden cerrado dejará sistemáticamente afuera esos anuncios que pueden volvernos mensajeros” [“it must be written as an antinovel because any closed order will systematically leave outside those announcements that can make messengers out of us”].⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Cortázar always holds a suspicion towards the writers of the *nouveau roman*, especially in his following novel *62: A Model Kit*, which I will explore in depth in Chapter 3.

⁴⁶ Graciela De Sola, *Julio Cortázar y el hombre Nuevo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1968) 92.

⁴⁷ De Sola 147.

⁴⁸ Ana María Barrenechea, *Cuaderno de bitácora de “Rayuela”* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1983) 93 and 112.

⁴⁹ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 560; *Hopscotch* 397.

On the other hand, Amestoy's book, *La novela mandala* (1972), includes a brief comparative study of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Hopscotch* that is also pertinent to my analysis of Umberto Eco's conceptualisation of experimental writing in the early 1960s and the importance of modernism for a writer like Cortázar. Amestoy makes valuable points that connect *Ulysses* and *Hopscotch*. She stresses, for instance, that both depict Western Man's odyssey through modern times, although Cortázar's novel adds something new: a collaboration with the reader.⁵⁰ Indeed, I will argue that that collaboration is a distinctive quality of Cortázar's experimentalism; something that Barrenechea, in "La estructura de *Rayuela*, de Julio Cortázar" (1972), also emphasises at the same time that she undertakes a relevant analysis on the duality of *Hopscotch*, which I will address in Chapter 2, because it unleashes the "metafictional" or "self-referential" narrative that I argue to be another characteristic feature of these author's experimentalism. Curutchet's *Julio Cortázar o la crítica de la razón pragmática* (1972), in turn, represents a helpful attempt to fill the gap between experimentalism and authenticity. According to Curutchet, in Cortázar's work we find a denunciation of utopianism that helps us to understand Cortázar's rejection of authenticity in avant-gardism,⁵¹ and which I consider to be another constant of his experimentalism. Evelyn Picon Garfield also pays particular attention to Cortázar's influence by the historical avant-gardes in *¿Es Cortázar un Surrealista?* (1975). She debates the idea that Cortázar's work is involved with Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics, something that I will analyse in Chapter 4, when I draw parallels between Calvino's and Cortázar's Oulipian experiments and Jarry's 'Pataphysics, focusing on the use of chance and the absurd in the creative process. Even though Picon Garfield explores what she believes are the main connections between the Surrealists and Cortázar's work, I will centre my argument on Cortázar's ultimate rejection of Surrealism. She concludes that he is a Surrealist in spite of himself: "Julio Cortázar es surrealista a pesar de sí mismo."⁵² However, as I will

⁵⁰ Lida Aronne Amestoy, *La novela mandala* (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1972) 22.

⁵¹ For more information on Cortázar's critique see Juan Carlos Curutchet, *Julio Cortázar o la crítica de la razón pragmática* (Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1972) and the subsection "Utopian Quests & Experimentalism," in Chapter 2 of my thesis.

⁵² Evelyn Picon Garfield, *¿Es Julio Cortázar un surrealista?* (Madrid: Biblioteca Románica Hispánica, 1975) 250.

discuss in Chapter 2, his rejection is symptomatic of the distinctive 1960s experimentalism I am tackling in my thesis.

From the 1980s onwards critics such as Steven Boldy and Jaime Alazraki have carried out interesting readings of the experimental and the philosophical currents that influenced Cortázar. Boldy, for example, denies the antinovelistic attribution to *Hopscotch*. In *The Novels of Julio Cortázar* (1980) Boldy, in line with McHale's late-modernist assertion, insists that the book is strictly speaking a novel,⁵³ as it contains "a more coherent and classical story than it is sometimes credited with."⁵⁴ He explains that it is a distinctive work of the 1960s not for its antinovelistic character but for its experimental structure, which is something that De Sola, Barrenechea and Amestoy also note. Boldy is the first – and probably only – critic to reject the belief that *Hopscotch* is a completely open project with all the work left to the reader. Instead, Boldy's reader is asked to perform a critical reading and become deeply involved with the novel, which is *one* and not multiple. This analysis is fundamental to my Chapters 1 and 2, as I direct my arguments towards readdressing the understanding (or misunderstanding) that such a fluid noun (openness) still suggests today. *Hopscotch*, as Boldy asserts, is not completely random, and thinking that it can be read freely in any arrangement is to misunderstand the novel.

Alazraki's *Hacia Cortázar: Aproximaciones a su obra* (1994) is probably the best approach to the meaning of experiment in Cortázar's work to date. He states that Cortázar might be the first Latin American novelist who, without betraying his origins, approaches the Western literary tradition in search of authenticity.⁵⁵ Among these Western tendencies we find Existentialism, at first, but then Surrealism, the American *tough writers*, High-Modernism and every avant-garde movement he came across, all approached in a mission to abandon rationalistic cul-de-sacs, a mission which represents his personal experience of modernity and modernism. This search is, I would add, another distinctive feature of Cortázar's experimentalism. Alazraki also compares

⁵³ Steven Boldy, *The novels of Julio Cortázar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 30.

⁵⁴ Boldy 30.

⁵⁵ Jaime Alazraki, *Hacia Cortázar: aproximaciones a su obra* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1994) 178.

Cortázar's novels with the notion of open work introduced by Eco in 1962, suggesting that the main parallels between his novels and *Ulysses* (the primary subject of Eco's theory) is that they can all be considered "works in progress."⁵⁶ I agree with Alazraki's understanding of that openness, which proposes "un rechazo de un orden singular para proponer una pluralidad de órdenes" ["a rejection of a singular order to propose a plurality of orders"].⁵⁷ He provides an explanation that may clarify what he means by it in application to *Hopscotch*:

Eco ha mostrado que la poética de la obra abierta es la respuesta del arte a los nuevos criterios de discontinuidad e indeterminación con que trabaja la ciencia contemporánea. A esos parámetros responde la estructura de *Rayuela*.

Eco has shown that the poetics of the open work is art's response to the new criterion of discontinuity and indeterminacy with which contemporary science works. To these new parameters responds the structure of *Hopscotch*.⁵⁸

The novel thus becomes a series of fragments in constant movement that each reader will recompose in his/her own active and semiotic way. Alazraki, however, again relates Cortázar's search for the utopian and the authentic, while I would argue that the experimentalism that we find in novels like *Hopscotch* and *62: A Model Kit* is an articulation of that farce.

In the mid-1960s, as Calvino moved to Paris, he was also closer to the new Parisian philosophical currents of the period, mostly through the work of the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the semiotician Roland Barthes and the experimental writers Raymond Queneau and Perec. During those years in the historical capital of the avant-gardes Calvino began to further develop an experimentalism that, with its noticeable differences, can be related to Cortázar's own experience in Paris. While Cortázar's critics praise his experimentalism, several Italian critics of the period, such as the Marxists Franco Fortini, Carlo Laurenzi and Gian Carlo Roscioni did not think highly of his French interests. Anna Botta resumes some of these opinions in "Calvino and the Oulipo: An Italian Ghost in the Combinatory Machine?" (1997). She highlights, for instance, Fortini's reading of Calvino's experimentalism as an "hedonistic

⁵⁶ Alazraki, *Hacia* 178.

⁵⁷ Alazraki, *Hacia* 210.

⁵⁸ Alazraki, *Hacia* 214.

involution.”⁵⁹ In the Italian magazine *Wimbledon 2*, Fortini writes that after the publication of *La giornata di uno scrutatore* (1963) [*The Watcher and other Stories* (1971)] “[t]utto il lavoro alla Queneau e Perec mi sembra micidiale, distruttivo” [“all his work à la Queneau and Perec seem deadly and destructive to me”], and this was because Calvino “[f]u avvelenato dalla produzione francese di quel period parigino” [“was poisoned by the French production during that Parisian period”].⁶⁰ Laurenzi also states that: “Ho ammirato Calvino fino a quando è stato uno scrittore tradizionale. Quando è andato in Francia, imbarcando i vari Queneau e Perec (che con il suo talento lo sovrastava), è diventato uno scrittore sperimentale.” [“I admired Calvino when he was a traditional writer. Since he went to Paris, embarking on various Queneau and Perec (while his talent was above that), he became an experimental writer.”]⁶¹ However, it is during this period that Calvino became interested in structuralism and semiotics, an interest that led him to attend a famous seminar by Barthes on Honoré de Balzac’s *Sarrasine* (1830) and A. J. Greimas’s courses at the *École des Hautes Études*.⁶² This also deepened his literary experimentation, with publications such as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *La taverna dei destini incrociati* (1973) [*The Tavern of Crossed Destinies* (1977)].⁶³ In fact, it is also in Paris that he became a member of the French Oulipo (which stands for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* [Workshop of Potential Literature]), just as his experimentalism began displaying similar features to that of Cortázar: an interest in a collaborative reader, a search for a formal adequacy, a metafictional expression of the creative process and a refusal of authenticity in avant-gardism.

Calvino’s most influential critics who provide a more positive reading of his experimentalism. Mario Barenghi, Guido Bonsaver, Philippe Daros and Kerstin Pilz, for example, stress his rejection of the stylistic principles of the *nouveau roman* in his work, especially in the compilation

⁵⁹ Anna Botta, “Calvino and the Oulipo: An Italian Ghost in the Combinatory Machine?” *MLN* 112.1 (1997): 81.

⁶⁰ Botta 81.

⁶¹ Botta 81.

⁶² For a personal description of his interest in structuralism see Calvino, “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) and the subsection “Impersonal Characters,” in Chapter 3 of my thesis.

⁶³ Published together in English in 1977.

of short stories *Cosmicomics*, and in his essay “Cibernetica e fantasmi” (1967) [“Cybernetics and Ghosts” (1986)]. Pilz, in *Mapping Complexity* (2005), brings the aforementioned rejection to the fore in order to reveal what she considers Calvino’s experimental intentions: to revitalise a “fossilised humanism.”⁶⁴ Calvino’s writing, according to Pilz, may share some qualities with the writing of Robbe-Grillet, but we do not need to go too far to realise that he is creating anthropomorphic characters based on mythological structures. In Chapter 3, I will consider that this revitalisation of a seemingly moribund humanity is part of the experimentalism that Calvino undertakes in his writing. Bonsaver also argues in favour of Calvino’s anthropological interests.⁶⁵ He detects a certain “objectivistic” style in *Cosmicomics*, which remind us of the filmic (in terms of descriptive) narrative of the French novelists. But Calvino, through a character whose name is a palindrome, Qfwfq, and whose shape changes in every story (he is sometimes a bird, sometimes an amphibian, and even a light particle), creates stories “full of human,”⁶⁶ in the sense that he is revitalising that moribund sense of humanity in his experimental writing. My aim, then, is to explain the connection between his anthropological and mythical concerns, and his experimentalism, at the same time that I detach it from the more objectified (or de-humanised) practice of the new avant-garde.

Despite these personal and literary associations, Calvino’s and Cortázar’s works have not yet been examined in tandem. My aim in this comparative thesis therefore is to generate new thought about the historical contexts and fictional representations of these authors, and, in doing so, to broaden the scholarly debates around the work of both Calvino and Cortázar. At the same time, my aim is to foreground the importance of comparative literature as a discipline that allows such multilingual, transnational and transversal approaches to the study of literature. Only a comparative study can provide a detailed analysis of these authors’ biographical experiences

⁶⁴ Kerstin Pilz, *Mapping Complexity. Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino* (Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd., 2005) 28.

⁶⁵ Guido Bonsaver, “Il Calvino ‘semiotico’ dalla crisi del romanzo naturalistico all’opera come macrotesto,” *The Italianist* 14.1 (June 1994): 165.

⁶⁶ Bonsaver, “Il Calvino 165.

alongside a focused study of their works, which were written in different languages in a country foreign to both.

The Structure of this Thesis

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas S. Kuhn states that there is an important development in natural sciences every time “an individual or group first produces a synthesis able to attract most of the next generation’s practitioners.”⁶⁷ In science an important discovery thus triggers a revolution that changes a whole paradigm; i.e. the manner in which scientists approach nature and, in turn, their experiments. In Chapters 1 and 2 of my thesis this Kuhnian approach will help us understand why the Italian critic, Umberto Eco reads James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in this way, as the trigger that caused a revolution in the history of literature, changing the understanding and methodology of a generation of writers that would have its ramifications in the work of Cortázar and Calvino. I will turn to Eco to outline the reasons why he reads Joyce as a writer who provided a successful response to the European context of the 1920s, and how these reasons were still valid for the work of the 1960s-experimentalists who are my primary interest. I therefore analyse this new paradigm in order to respond to the question of whether these authors’ experimentalism was related to the poetics of the open work theorised by Eco.

A true understanding of 1960s experimentalism is not possible without the careful exploration of the terminology of the period. That is why I begin my analysis scrutinising Eco’s arguments about contemporary poetics. In *Opera Aperta* (1962) [*The Open Work* (1989)] Eco articulates his theory of the open work in order to explain what he believes to be the new meanings of literary form. According to Eco, Joyce breaks with an old paradigm dominated by the aesthetic postulates of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, reproducing a complex narrative more adjusted to the experience of the modern world. Joyce’s great achievement in *Ulysses*, in fact, is thus the turn of the form of the narrative into meaning itself. In other words, the form of

⁶⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 19.

the narrative becomes a reflection of a universe that has lost order. Eco associates the apparent disorder, or “openness,”⁶⁸ of *Ulysses* with Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, which provoked that Kuhnian change of paradigm in the natural sciences. In a world where truth is relative to the position of our senses, the forms that Joyce included in *Ulysses* are more representative of what Eco calls the new “chaosmos,” a contradictory synthesis taken from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*⁶⁹ (in response to Aquinas’ “Cosmo Ordinato”).⁷⁰ On the contrary, only partial, unfinished and open works stand for a more authentic account of that chaosmos, which includes disorder (chaos) in its form. This lack of completion also means that the work becomes more demanding for the recipient. In fact, it is through this communicative act between author and reader that Eco ends up shaping his theory of semiology during the 1970s. In the process of reading Eco’s “model reader”⁷¹ undertakes an experience of that disorder or openness that he/she fills with his/her own semiotic projection. Eco’s thesis of the open work, his theory of a new chaosmos and the model reader are, then, important for the introduction of the cultural context in which Cortázar and Calvino published their work. Eco believes that the writer of the 1960s is no longer experimenting with an ordered reality, nor trying to break with convention to return art to society (like the historical avant-gardist of the 1910s-1930s), but the whole system of representation experienced a shift of paradigm because people’s perception of the world changed accordingly.

In Chapter 2, I claim that this openness carries or overrides a utopian quality that can be linked to the historical avant-gardes. Patricia Novillo-Corvalán, in her essay “Rereading Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* through Joyce’s *Ulysses*” proposes a strong connection between Cortázar, Eco and Joyce, by insisting that “[j]ust as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* embody the theoretical currents of intertextuality, Bakhtinian dialogism, and Umberto Eco’s concept of the

⁶⁸ See Umberto Eco’s *Opera aperta* (Milan: Tascabili Bompiani, 2006).

⁶⁹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2012) 118, line 21.

⁷⁰ See Eco’s *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos, The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, trans. Elen Esrock, ed. David Robey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁷¹ See Eco’s *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Open Work ... so Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, as well as his later work, *62 A Model Kit* ... similarly exemplify the major theoretical currents of twentieth-century literature."⁷² My intention is to develop Novillo-Corvalán's suggestion by linking *Hopscotch* to Eco's concepts of open work and work in progress in order to disentangle this "traditional" utopianism, which is carried forwards from the historical avant-gardes and revitalised in the 1960s. Rethinking the poetics of the open work through Cortázar will, then, help to unravel the conceptual map of experimental practices at the beginning of the 1960s and it will also serve to illustrate the manner in which the historical avant-gardes influenced the generation that was coming to prominence at the time. My approach to experimentalism will, then, shed new light onto the understanding of Cortázar's novel in the 1960s literary scene from today's standpoint.

In Chapter 3, I will explore Calvino's and Cortázar's reaction to the French *nouveau roman* writers in order to offer definite proof of these authors' disassociation from the practices of the new avant-garde. Critics tend to draw easy parallels between the work of Cortázar and Robbe-Grillet, as well as between Calvino's novels and those of the French new avant-garde. I will look at the work of various critics. Eco, Alazraki, Duncan and Boldy identify a strong stylistic influence of the *nouveau roman* writers on Cortázar's work. Likewise, although to a lesser degree, critics such as Beno Weiss, Peter Bondanella, Andrea Ciccarelli, Federico M. Federici and Adam Shatz⁷³ have claimed that Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor had a considerable influence on the works of Calvino. In this chapter I will show that these critics rarely provide a satisfactory explanation for their claim, and the ones that do fail to identify Calvino's and Cortázar's utmost parody and rejection of those new avant-gardists' practices. In fact this parody is, adding to my thesis, a ludic element that they share and is key to their experimentalism. While Robbe-Grillet

⁷² Patricia Novillo-Corvalán, "Rereading Cortázar's *Rayuela* through Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Moveable Type* 4 (London: University College London, 2008): 63.

⁷³ See Beno Weiss, *Understanding Italo Calvino* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 88; Peter Bondanella and Andrea Ciccarelli, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 8; Federico M. Federici's *Translation as Stylistic Evolution: Italo Calvino Creative Translator of Raymond Queneau* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 48; and Adam Shatz's "At the Crime Scene," rev. of *A Sentimental Novel* (2014), online, *London Review of Books*, Internet, 10 June 2015. Available: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n15/adam-shatz/at-the-crime-scene>

continued to strive against the representation of depth in the psychological novel and the determinism of Naturalism in an effort to re-enact the historical violence of the avant-gardes, Cortázar and Calvino were aware of this historical burden and of the failure of the historical avant-gardes to reconnect art with social life. Robbe-Grillet wanted to provide what he regarded as a more authentic representation of the real with a very similar narrative to that of the historical avant-gardists, employing, for instance, the category of privileged newness – inscribed in the very name of the group’s central production – to describe the practices of this new generation of writers. However, this category, as I reflect in this chapter, is problematic, because it posits a fundamental contradiction, for “new” cannot be “new” twice. In the mid-sixties Calvino and Cortázar were, in fact, careful not to label their work avant-gardist, or even ahead of its time, or even “new.” Studying Cortázar’s novel *62: A Model Kit* and Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*, I will argue that there is an influence of the *nouveau roman*’s stylistic precepts on those works, but I will also contend that the projects of Cortázar and Calvino were rather more ludic, anthropological and self-reflective than Robbe-Grillet’s novels. Calvino’s work experienced a transformation at this time, mostly through contact with French structuralism and the work of the *Tel Quel* group. Similarly, Cortázar updated his bookshelves with books by the new French avant-gardists. However, they both react to the denaturalised narrative of the *nouveau roman* writers, infusing their polymorphic and uncharacteristic characters with anthropomorphic qualities. I will thus focus on the *raison d’être* of “impersonal” characters such as Calvino’s Qfwfq, and Cortázar’s Cronopios and “my paredros” because this will show the manner in which their narratives unfasten themselves from the practices of the historical (and new) avant-gardes while engaging with issues that, nonetheless, energised them. I will argue that their experimental writings, flourishing in the reimagined Paris of the 1960s, are examples of this complex division.

In Chapter 4, I will show that experimental practices are often interdisciplinary. Such experimental practices can occur when writing crosses the boundaries of the page to become a

sculpture (like the corporeal poems of Catalan poet Joan Brossa)⁷⁴ or a piece of music (like Dadaist Hugo Ball's sound poems).⁷⁵ This crossover contributes to the reinventions of literature suggested by Bray et al. Multimodality is, in fact, also a constant that runs through the kind of experimental writing that Levato identifies. In this chapter, I therefore move deeper into the comparative study of the multimodal works of Calvino and Cortázar, focusing on Paris towards the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Calvino and Cortázar frequently repeated, often playfully, the sense of exhaustion that Barth refers to in their own work.⁷⁶ Their experimentalisms are, in fact, tightly linked to that particular exhaustion of form, and thus it is important to consider why chance becomes so important in their practices, or, in other words, why chance enters the experiment. I initially focus on the combinatory and the "used-upness" of form that a group of French experimental writers known as Oulipo places in the centre of their interests. I then move to Calvino's and Cortázar's interdisciplinary and collaborative book *La fosse de Babel* (1972), which has a strong Oulipian influence, and which I will analyse in depth. We will see that the content of *La fosse de Babel*, in fact evidences a larger confluence of experimental practices that stretches Calvino's and Cortázar's experimentalism.

In the same period Calvino published *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, a book that manifests his most characteristic experimentalism, and "Cybernetics and Ghosts," an essay in which he proposes a literary machine that would undertake a similar role to that of the author: jumbling form, creating different (but finite) combinations, some of which may even make sense. We will see that Cortázar also puts forwards a machine to read *Hopscotch*, the Rayuel-o-matic, invented by Pataphysician Juan Esteban Fassio. These machines, at the same time that they open up the possibilities of the imaginary, establish a mechanical constraint that limits their freedom. I will show that an emphasis on the constraint, on the materiality of the work, and on the often-absurd

⁷⁴ Find some of his most famous Corporeal Poems online at *Fundació Joan Brossa*, Internet, 23 July 2015. Available: <http://www.fundaciojoanbrossa.cat/obra.php?idmenu=3&menu2=7&submenu=1>

⁷⁵ More information on Hugo Ball and his dadaist experiments can be found online at *The International Dada Archive*, Internet, 23 July 2015. Available: <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/dadas/ball.htm>

⁷⁶ See Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984) 62-76.

limits that need to exist in order to contain it, is characteristic of the experimentalism of Calvino and Cortázar by this time in Paris. Thus, drawing a comparison between the experiments of the Oulipo and those of Calvino and Cortázar, I will finally reconsider the ethical choice of these authors when focusing on those constraints for their creative process. Alison James's article "Automatism, Arbitrariness, and the Oulipian Author" (2006), in which she debates the consciousness of Oulipian experimentation, will prove fruitful for an investigation of the political contradictions of *La fosse the Babel* – one that we should consider in the specific context of the revolts of May 1968. It may, in fact, be due to the turmoil of the French uprisings that an experimentalism that was metafictional and democratic began to experience a crisis at this point.

Indeed, after the Parisian revolts of May 1968, their interest in a playful experimentalism experiences a diminution. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will address this change. Calvino's book *Invisible Cities* and Cortázar's *A Manual for Manuel* were both written and published while the authors lived in Paris during the years following the eruptions of May 1968. Thus, rather than attempting a theoretical mapping of these texts, I mean to produce a close reading of them, attending to the complex contextual political and literary goings-on of the period in order to situate them in relation to the authors' earlier works and to other literary developments of the late 1960s early 1970s. These two chapters, in fact, could be understood as one linked study of their post-'68 work; an approach that provides manifold answers as to the development of experimentalism after those uprisings, uprisings that affected, to a greater or lesser degree, the lives of both authors. *Invisible Cities* and *A Manual for Manuel* were conceived, drafted and published with the memories of the fluorescence of resistance at the barricades and the brutal retaliation of the state still fresh in the authors' minds and in the ambience of the still-uneasy city. We might wish to think of the epochal events of May '68, then, as signal of McHale's late-modernist and postmodernist shift.⁷⁷ However, I would like to argue that the production of these novels in styles that clearly intersect with the concerns of '68 push us towards an evaluation of the authors'

⁷⁷ See Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987).

development at this time that is far more complex than the modulation between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Broadly, it also involves a rearticulation of the aesthetic and political drive of the historical avant-gardes. It will be useful, then, to compare the aesthetic and political drives of both Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Cortázar's *A Manual for Manuel* with a view to the particular Paris of that time – an exploration that should also help us to understand the direction of the various contemporary experimentalisms. In the preceding chapters my analysis of Cortázar's and Calvino's experimentalisms was aimed at revealing a shared interest in the ludic and the combinatorial, and their also shared rejection of the new avant-gardist groups. However, the study of these two 1970s novels – *Invisible Cities* and *A Manual for Manuel* – which I will pursue in the last two chapters will situate them on opposing sides of a dialogue between two aesthetically and ethically distinct varieties of experimental writing. We will in fact see a realignment that perhaps amounts to a reversal of the writers' earlier positions. In these final chapters, then, we will learn how both authors create a meaningful dialogue with their time and address the value of experimentalism itself through their literature.

Throughout this thesis I will, then, revise the aesthetic conceptualisation of experimental writing in combination with close readings of Calvino's and Cortázar's books. Due to the multilingual nature of these authors' criticism I use authorised English translations for reference where possible and provide my own translations for the texts that do not yet have an English version.

CHAPTER 1: THE EXPERIMENTAL & THE OPEN WORK

“Perhaps we are in a position to state that for these works of art an incomplete knowledge of the system is in fact an essential feature of its formulation.”

Umberto Eco¹

1. The Conceptualisation of Openness

In this first chapter, I will introduce the three main critical categories that Eco attributes to the poetics of Modernism because, according to him, these categories were still unfolding throughout the 1950s and early 1960s European literary world. These categories are openness, the new chaosmos and the work in progress. I will show how they all relate to experimental writing and in which ways they denote re-enactments of earlier experimental practices.

Introducing them will, therefore, lay the groundwork for a chronological and subsequently more nuanced approach to the experimentalisms of Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino in the Paris of the 1960s and 1970s, which I shall address in my subsequent chapters.

The term “openness” became a critical category with Umberto Eco’s essay “The Poetics of the Open Work” in 1959, and was further developed in collections such as *Opera aperta* (1962) [*The Open Work* (1989)], *Le poetiche di Joyce* (1965) [*The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* (1989)] and *Lector in fabula* (1979) [*The Role of the Reader* (1984)].² Within this category Eco condenses the radical shift in representation that art experienced during the first half of that twentieth century. Some critics, like David Robey and Michael Caesar, stress the importance of polysemy and the pre-eminent role of the reader in *The Open Work*, two of the major focuses of the Modernists which were also to become recurrent themes in the literature of the 1960s.³ Yet Eco also rescues the epithet

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 15-16.

² *Opera aperta* was published in 1962 and revised in 1967 and 1976. The book *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* contains *Lector in Fabula* and a compilation of other essays previously published in Italian.

³ David Robey, Introduction, *The Open* viii.

“experimental” from the historical avant-gardes and gives it a new, renovated meaning more adjusted to the mass society of his time.

At one level Eco’s theory represents a response to the idealism of the Italian thinker Benedetto Croce. Croce, a Hegelian who opposed Positivism, rejects the idea that reality can be explained by scientific means. Instead of this, he insists upon the importance of aesthetics to the understanding of a reality constructed with our intuition and our senses. However, Croce also goes so far as to attempt to establish a universal and univocal description of the aesthetic experience, which, according to Eco, completely foregoes the materiality of the work of art and its socio-historical context:

Art for Croce was a purely mental phenomenon that could be communicated directly from the mind of the artist to that of the reader, viewer, or listener. The intuition/expression which constituted the essence of the work of art was thus an unchanging entity ... The material medium of the artistic work was of no real significance; it merely served as a stimulus to enable the reader to reproduce in him- or herself the artist’s original intuition.⁴

Eco does not undervalue the importance of aesthetic expression but he feels, instead, that it is a necessity to draw attention away from the work of art towards its making and consumption. He wants to move from a potentially sterile idealism to a fertile exchange of information focusing on the reception of determinate experimental pieces, mostly by contemporary musicians (Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, Henri Pousseur, Karlheinz Stockhausen and the serial music of Anton Webern), artists (Jacob Agam, Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder and Pol Bury) and writers (chiefly the members of Gruppo 63: Antonio Porta, Edoardo Sanguineti and so on).⁵ In the 1950s, Luigi Pareyson, Eco’s tutor and doctoral supervisor at the University of Turin, developed a similar approach with his theory of “formativity,” in which more importance is placed on the “consumption” and “interpretation” of the work of art, rather than on its “expression.” Eco, then, took Pareyson’s ideas further, developing the concept of openness and analysing the cultural meaning of the new European avant-gardes.⁶

⁴ Robey ix.

⁵ Eco, *The Open* 25. See Chapter 5 for more information about the authors of Gruppo 63.

⁶ Robey xii.

At another level, Eco establishes that James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) represents a watershed in Western literature because it is the first novel that ventures beyond what St. Thomas Aquinas refers to as the "Cosmo Ordinato" ["Ordered Cosmos"],⁷ to actually create "a new cosmos."⁸ This new cosmos is characterised by an endless constellation of intertextual references that mirror modernity's paradoxical "chaosmos" (a fusion of chaos and order), and produces a sense of ambiguity at its reception.⁹ It is by studying Joyce's reception, then, that Eco realises that literature had, through High Modernism, reached a state of representation that went far beyond the field of pure aesthetic experience proposed by Croce. Joyce's writing was open, in the sense that Joyce focused on a search for a more authentic account of the real through a more committed receptor.¹⁰ Eco attaches the critical term "openness" to this new understanding and representation of the world, which involves self-referentiality in the creative search, and an active collaboration on the part of the reader. The process of writing and a lack of structural completion are made explicit in the open narrative and, at the same time – or perhaps consequently – it creates a recipient who becomes paramount in the production of meaning.

Despite Eco's explanatory efforts, some tensions have arisen around the term "openness." Its perceived ambivalence and speculative elasticity, for example, and the fact that every receptor of an "open work" is prone to experience different levels of openness and come up with disparate interpretations, have led some critics to dismiss its formulation.¹¹ Eco, however, insists that the ambivalence we find in the contemporary work of art is related to the Einsteinian concept of relativism found throughout modern science and philosophy, and not to completely loose and unwitting poetics. Actually, the Italianist, Michael Caesar, explains that Eco's notion has been criticised for focusing on "poetics" – what Eco understands as the structural mechanism of an

⁷ Eco, *Opera aperta* 3.

⁸ Eco, *The Aesthetics* 2.

⁹ Eco, *The Open* 41. See Introduction for reference to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

¹⁰ Michael Caesar, *Umberto Eco. Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) 6-7.

¹¹ For more information about these critics see Caesar 14.

auto-referential text that has “the capacity for releasing effects of ambiguity and polysemy”¹² – and forgetting the “poetry” of the work of art. However, Eco insists that since the Symbolists “the ‘point’ of the work appears to be exhausted in the description of it, rather than in the enjoyment of the work itself,” mainly because we are “in an age in which art is appreciated rationally, with the intellect, not intuitively.”¹³

Eco is merely conceptualising a determinate cultural reception, which, in spite of its rational bias, can also provide an enjoyment that does not necessarily call for a total understanding of the work. In order to justify this enjoyment, he uses the example of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939), as we do not need to exhaust the totality of its meaning to experience a certain *intuitive* pleasure when we read.¹⁴ Finally, Caesar also mentions the dangers of over-simplistic understandings of “openness” as opposed to “closed,” an idea that would contradict the supposedly multiple interpretations that the open work should potentiate.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Eco’s analogies from contemporary music, art and literature distance his conceptualisation from reductionist interpretations to “reveal a reciprocal play of problems in the most disparate areas of contemporary culture ... which point to the common elements in a new way of looking at the world.”¹⁶ The poetics of the open work, as Caesar warns us, have often been misinterpreted because they “are not those of aesthetics, but of cultural history,”¹⁷ thus I contend that the right approach to a re-examination of the adequacy of Eco’s concept involves a re-thinking of experimentalism in the cultural environment of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly after the vortex of High Modernism and Joyce’s new chaosmos.

¹² Eco, *The Aesthetics* 1.

¹³ Caesar 14.

¹⁴ Eco, *The Open* 175.

¹⁵ Caesar 14.

¹⁶ Eco, *The Open* 18.

¹⁷ Caesar 19.

2. Towards a new Chaosmos

Before moving on to Eco's views on experimental writing, however, I will read his consideration of Joyce's *Ulysses* as the definitive break with the Naturalist tradition and the epitome of openness because we cannot understand the evolution of experimental writing in the twentieth century without first analysing Eco's connection of *Ulysses* with medieval aesthetics. In his book of essays *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos*, Eco starts by studying the significance of Joyce's work within the paradigm of twentieth-century literature. *Ulysses*, according to Eco, is the book in which Joyce first achieves a famously particular way of melding the structure of his narrative, and the style and action developed within it with the cultural context of the period. As the famous "schemata"¹⁸ that Stuart Gilbert extracted from the author reveals, Joyce narrates a day in the life of Dublin, so that every hour corresponds to a different chapter – with each chapter adopting a particular style according to its action, and with every action corresponding to one of the episodes of Homer's *Odyssey*. As Gilbert proposed, they could each also correspond to an organ of the body, a discipline, a colour, a symbol and a writing technique. Form and content speak of, and to, one another to the extent that it becomes impossible to conceive of them as separate, and it is precisely this amalgam of styles, subjects and references, the multiplicity of readings that arise from the narrative and the consequent demand for an attentive reader that causes Eco to think of *Ulysses* as one of the most representative "open works" ever written (the *most* representative is, unsurprisingly, *Finnegans Wake*).¹⁹ Joyce's great achievement in *Ulysses* – this turning of the form of the expression into meaning itself – was therefore to renovate an adequacy of form previously generally taken for granted or subject to determinate tradition. With this Joyce rejects, or, according to Eco, *destroys* the traditional world and the biased determinism of Naturalist writers in order to create a new formal representation of modern culture. Eco writes that "[t]his radical conversion from 'meaning' as content of an expression, to the form of

¹⁸ Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses: A study* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955) 30.

¹⁹ Eco argues: "Anche l'ultimo Joyce, autore del testo più aperto di cui sia possibile parlare [*Finnegans Wake*], costruisce il proprio lettore attraverso una strategia testuale." ["Even the last Joyce, author of the most open text we can talk about, builds its reader through a textual strategy."] Eco, *Lector* 59.

the expression as meaning, is the direct consequence of the refusal and destruction of the traditional world in *Ulysses*.”²⁰

According to Eco, the destruction of the traditional world involves overcoming two traditional models, the Aristotelian and the Thomist, which for centuries defined the aesthetic parameters of Western literature. Stephen’s and Bloom’s streams of consciousness, for instance, disrupt the Aristotelian notion of action in which characters need to respect a certain time and space continuum, and they also dislocate the Thomist triad of aesthetic principles (wholeness, harmony and radiance) that conceive of the work of art as a closed *summa* of the universe. According to Eco, the Thomist principles propose a model that individualises the aesthetic object, which is thought of as being harmoniously contained regardless of the artist’s intentions and its reception. Thus Joyce, if he had followed this principle, could not have included an entire theory of the creative process as he had in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1913),²¹ for example, because he would have violated that wholeness. In fact Joyce does not only include a theory on modern aesthetics through Stephen, but also discusses the need for new terminology to describe the creative process via this character. The inclusion of this self-referential narrative is then, as Eco states, “completely foreign to the Aristotelian-Thomist problematic.”²²

Joyce interacts with literary tradition in *Ulysses* by adjusting the narrative to the situations that Bloom faces during the day: while he is at the office of the *Freeman’s Journal* attempting to place an advertisement, the narrative breaks into small sections with subheadings suggesting the activity of the journalists, thereby reminding us of the idea of *consonantia* (harmony) posited by Aquinas and displayed in the traditional novel: the headings correspond to separable parts, the sum of which could constitute a harmonious whole which, in this case, would represent the hectic action of the journal’s office and the style in which the news is written. More importantly, however, Joyce takes a step further and includes several registers that do not respect the

²⁰ Eco, *The Aesthetics* 37.

²¹ For a detailed explanation of the aesthetic principles, see James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992) 229-231.

²² Eco, *The Aesthetics* 17.

understanding of the whole work as a closed system in the Dantean or medieval sense, but instead include the immense variety of voices and situations with which Bloom interacts through the day. This illustrates the chaotic sense that Eco emphasises in *Ulysses*. The intertextualities and stylistic varieties that refer to disparate texts and traditions pile up an indefinite sum of parts that may not create a harmonious cosmos or totality. The schematiser Gilbert indicates that *Ulysses* “achieves a coherent and integral interpretation of life, a static beauty according to the definition of Aquinas” and defines Joyce as “a composer who takes the facts which experience offers and harmonises them in such a way that, without losing their vitality and integrity, they yet fit together and form a concordant whole.”²³ The difference between Gilbert’s “concordant whole” and Eco’s “new chaosmos,” however, is that for Eco the new representation includes the disorder – “chaos” – of modernity in the form of its representation. Joyce does not harmonise his narrative in the same way as the classics and, thus, his project contains a more realistically chaotic image of the universe – an image that opens up a dialogue with his Thomist education at the same time as it takes a step further in his representation of modernity. In fact, the difficulty of giving a definite answer to the question of whether Joyce’s work achieves a harmonious unity is one of the things that Eco wants to clarify:

Joyce è arrivato a concepire questa nuova immagine dell’universo partendo da una nozione di ordine e di forma suggeritagli dalla sua educazione tomista e nella sua opera si può notare la dialettica continua tra queste due visioni del mondo, una dialettica che trova le sue mediazioni e le sue aporia, indica una soluzione e denuncia una crisi.

Joyce has come to conceive this new image of the universe starting from a notion of order and form suggested to him by his Thomist education, and in his work one can notice the continuous dialectics between these two visions of the world; a dialectic that finds its mediation and its aporia, indicates a solution and reveals a crisis.²⁴

Joyce configures an image of the world in accordance with the culture of his period. He departs from a medieval summa in order to arrive at a more perceptive representation of the crisis of scientific and philosophical indeterminacy of modernity; a crisis which is not just scientific and philosophical, but also social and religious. In fact, Joyce, through his narrative, interacts with a

²³ Gilbert 9-10.

²⁴ Eco, *Opera* 4-5.

tradition at the same time as he fills the gaps left by a deteriorated Catholicism. Eco, in order to find an example of this new order, refers to the episode known as “Proteus.” Here Stephen’s thoughts are represented in a transformative narrative that echoes the philosophical sentiment of disorder that scientific advances and a diminishment of faith brought to society at the beginning of the twentieth century, a dialectical approach that was, for Eco, introduced by Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity and by quantum physics. Thus the episode “Proteus” demonstrates “the passage from an orderly cosmos to a fluid and watery chaos.”²⁵ He then argues that Joyce’s cultural world is in crisis and that the author cannot provide a harmonious and static image without betraying its nature. Instead, Joyce offers an interwoven cosmos of connotations that precisely adapts to human perceptions of their surroundings and themselves. Eco, after all, finds no better term than the fluid “openness” to refer to this new cosmos embedded with this structural dialectical tension. It is left to be determined, however, how this notion might be applicable to experimentalism.

3. New Meanings & Old Forms

Literary works that put the emphasis on the metafictional and the self-referential, and on the collaborative role of the reader, existed before *Ulysses* and, certainly, before the new writings that Eco refers to as open works. Eco insists that Joyce introduces something new that influences twentieth-century writing to the extent that history might be divided as before and after Joyce, but there are manifold examples of earlier writers undertaking similar paths. Miguel de Cervantes and Laurence Sterne, for instance, are writers whose oeuvres comprise a comparable encyclopaedic and chaotic summa to that of the author of *Ulysses*. In fact, the level of “closure” in some medieval works may also be debatable, because a fourteenth-century book like Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* suggests manifold interpretations, and High Modernist writers certainly

²⁵ Eco, *The Aesthetics* 36.

did not invent symbolism and intertextuality. Nonetheless, for Eco, the *Divine Comedy* is “the very antithesis of the open work” because Dante uses a fourfold stratification of meaning – Dante states that a good piece of writing should have a literal, allegorical, moral and spiritual sense²⁶ – and thus the book is a summa that only allows four levels of interpretation.²⁷ With this differentiation Eco means to stress that the techniques of the new writers establish a dialogue with the medieval world but, at the same time, go beyond that rigid allegorical system in order to reproduce the crisis of our vision of the world.

Whereas metafiction and self-referentiality are not new, for Eco the fact that Joyce is the first to favour this form of representation becomes central to an understanding of what happens to literature in the course of the twentieth century. As the century began, the Western world was experiencing a scientific and technological revolution that came to affect all of the fields of experience and representation. Einstein’s theory of relativity and quantum physics revolutionised the natural sciences, commercially successful series of paperback books began to enter the market, faster means of transportation fragmented people’s spatio-temporal perceptions, and technological advances brought social, political and economical changes that Eco identifies as instigators of openness. In fact, he praises artwork that thrived to become “metafore epistemologiche” [“epistemological metaphors”]²⁸ of that cultural break. For Eco, such change of paradigm was prematurely captured by Joyce’s prose, but the experimentalist writers of the 1960s and 1970s absorbed it and their contemporary readership was more eager to receive (and participate in) those representations. A thorough analysis of these roots thus allows Eco to contend that experimental post-war writers and composers tend towards self-referentiality and give a major role to the spectator in their pieces, just as Joyce had. The work of art that follows these experimentalists, therefore discloses that break from Aquinas’ *Cosmo Ordinato* and

²⁶ Dante’s description of the fourfold method of interpretation can be found in his letter to Can Grande della Scala. “Dante to Cangrande: English Version,” online, *Faculty of Georgetown*, Internet, 27 April 2015. Available: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>

²⁷ Eco, *The Open* 78.

²⁸ Eco, *Opera* 3 (Eco’s emphasis).

incorporates Joyce's shift in order to focus on the ambivalence of the real: they play with infinity of perception and multiplicity of meaning, which invite the reader or spectator to take part in the experience of art's materiality.

More broadly, these epistemological metaphors are the product of the crisis in the culture of the late nineteenth century that followed the realisation that the world could not be explained through scientific progress alone, as the truly positivistic approach to reality simply cannot exist. As Einstein's theories suggest, what we understand as the physical world constitutes a complex system of approaches subjected to individual points of view that are always relative to their position; Eco emphasises that the "multiple polarity is extremely close to the spatiotemporal conception of the universe which we owe to Einstein."²⁹ For Eco, the inclusion of ambivalence in the work of art, then, is not a mere game of forms, a cold entertainment or something restricted to High Modernist practices, but a contemporary inclusion that characterises the poetics of experimentalism in 1960s and 1970s. *Ulysses* may be the novel that inaugurates this transfer to the reader, but this tendency does not end with Joyce, for the structure of the works that Eco analyses also leaves in the receptor's hands the choice of making connections between references spread throughout the narrative, and these connections, as well as their interpretations, may vary from one reader to the next, or even for one reader between consecutive readings. In fact, this multiplicity depends on the reader to the extent that it will vary according to each single representation, giving them the role of creators:

The "open work" in this context is one before which viewers must choose their own points of view, make their own connections; its forms are epistemological metaphors which confirm, in art, the categories of indeterminacy and statistical distribution that guide the interpretation of natural facts; it is not a narration, but an image ... of discontinuity.³⁰

In *The Role of the Reader* Eco further develops his thesis of the collaborative and creative reader, whom he calls the model reader.³¹ In focusing on the communicative act, he becomes more

²⁹ Eco, *The Open* 18.

³⁰ Caesar 20.

³¹ Eco, *The Role* 7.

interested in semiology and information theory. He focuses, specifically, on the cooperation that a determinate text or code demands from a reader or receptor, and states that the meaning of this cooperation is not to be found in the text or in the novel, as Croce believed, but in the information possessed by the receptor and their proneness to difference. The text, according to Eco, is not the full experience of the communicative act, but only a limited part of it. Instead, it is in the spaces that surround the code or text – which he calls blank spaces or invisible narrative: “il testo è una macchina pigra che esige dal lettore un fiero lavoro cooperativo per riempire spazi di non-detto o di già-detto rimasti per così dire in bianco” [“the text is a lazy machine that demands from the Reader a tremendous cooperation in order to fill the unsaid or already-said spaces that remained blank so to speak”]³² – where the production of one meaning or another occurs. Eco admits, then, that a text can never be completely closed, as there will always be blanks to fill in and different representations to analyse, and that however open a work might be, and however contradictory its interpretations are, what remains certain is that a work “is still in the end a work, a made object, a thing done.”³³

Thus, while multiple interpretations can arise, the book (in its reproducibility) will always contain that particular work and not another. In fact, Eco introduces a distinction between levels of openness that comes from stressing the work’s materiality. According to this distinction, which I will apply to the study of Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* in the next chapter, the more space for interpretation the text provides the more radical will be the text’s openness. In *Le Livre*, by Stéphane Mallarmé, Eco finds a more radical poetics. Mallarmé’s project, according to Eco, achieves a level of openness similar to music and slightly different to that of Joyce’s narrative. *Le Livre* was never completed because the project involved turning the book into a mirror of the universe. The perception of the universe, for Mallarmé, suggests an infinitude that his book was only able to achieve by being physically unfinished, and thus radically open. Eco does not read Mallarmé’s book as a “failed” project, but as another sort of open work, what he calls “opera in

³² Eco, *Lector* 25.

³³ Caesar 20.

movimento” [“work in movement” or “in progress”], because it does not only contain that openness that we have studied, but the work is physically unfinished and polymorphic. Whereas in Joyce openness is dialectical, a result of a dialogue made with tradition and an effort to adjust the narrative to modern times, Mallarmé’s openness turns into an oxymoron because it is unavoidable. *Le Livre* is not a book – despite its title – but a project or work in movement in constant change and mutability that pays attention to the unattainability of human beings regarding that aesthetic completeness.

For Eco the aesthetics of the open work, and in particular of the work in progress, are strictly connected to experimentalism. He establishes that in order for a work to be experimental it needs to be open because closed structures do not represent modernity; they are, instead, institutionalised forms that are not breaking away from their tradition (he offers the example of the detective novel).³⁴ In his essay “Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l’avanguardia” (1985) he distinguishes between the avant-garde movements which, according to him, stipulate certain poetics to provoke a social reaction, and the poetics of experimentalism as a devotion for the work in itself: “Lo sperimentalismo tende a una provocazione interna alla storia di una data istituzione letteraria ... mentre l’avanguardia tende a una provocazione esterna, vuole cioè che la società nel proprio complesso riconosca la sua proposta” [“Experimentalism tends to cause an internal provocation in the history of a given literary institution ... while the avant-garde tends to an external provocation, wants that society as a whole acknowledges its own proposal.”]³⁵ This is, for Eco, then, the main shift for the meaning of experimental writing: from Futurism, Surrealism, and Dada’s experiment as a means to provoke a social revolution and redefine the role of art in society, to the experimentalism of the 1960s, by which time the meaning of experiment had turned inwards. The works of Italo Calvino and Julio Cortázar that I will study

³⁴ For an exploration on the relation between high literature and the open work, see Lubomír Doležal, “The Themato of Eco’s Semiotics of Literature,” *Reading Eco: An Anthology*, ed. Rocco Capozzi (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997) 111-120.

³⁵ Umberto Eco, “Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l’avanguardia,” *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (Milan: Tascabili Bompiani, 1985) 98.

in the following chapters were written in this later period. They are mostly open works, and even works in progress sometimes, but more importantly they engage in this redefinition of the experimental. They can no longer be considered avant-garde because the external provocation has become internal or, to put it in other words, because the social revolution has turned into a literary revolution where a new reader is prepared to receive – and even enjoy – a certain level of experimentalism. I will begin, then, by studying Cortázar's major novel, *Hopscotch* because it is chronologically the first novel of these two authors that represents this divorce, and then I will move on to analyse Calvino and Cortázar's response to Parisian new avant-garde groupings.

CHAPTER 2: EXPERIMENTALISM IN *HOPSCOTCH*

1. Joyce's Reception & Influence on *Hopscotch*

In this chapter I will venture an analysis of *Hopscotch* from three different angles. Firstly, I will study Cortázar's reception of *Ulysses* and Joyce's influence on his writing of *Hopscotch* in order to insert the novel into the new chaosmos proposed by Eco. After that I will discuss the levels of openness that operate in the narrative. Finally, I will examine a variety of experimental tensions that Cortázar enacts in *Hopscotch*, a novel (or anti-novel) that I contend contains a dialectical utopianism that Eco does not consider in his poetics of openness. This analysis will help me to rethink the concepts discussed in Chapter 1, and to introduce the idea of experimentalism that I want to put forward in this thesis.

Cortázar had two copies of *Ulysses* in his library: one in English and one in Spanish. It would seem that by 1944 he had already read the English version, a year before J. Salas Subirat published the first translation of *Ulysses* into Spanish in Argentina.¹ Cortázar, then, came across Joyce's work before it was even translated into Spanish, a fact that proves his strong interest in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition and his advanced knowledge of English. He almost certainly encountered *Ulysses* through another pioneering Argentinean author, Jorge Luis Borges, who had translated and published the episode known as "Penelope" in the cultural magazine *Proa*.²

Cortázar had probably read Borges's partial translation and perhaps some of his later

¹ This is the only annotated copy that Cortázar had of *Ulysses* in his library (now at Fundación Juan March in Madrid) and "1944" is inscribed upon it. Subirat published his translation of *Ulysses* into Spanish in 1945 in Buenos Aires. The translation had many errors but was available in Argentina seventeen years before it was in Spain. Cortázar pays special attention to the following sentence in Stephen's interior monologue in "Proteus": "You find my words dark. Darkness is in our souls, do you not think?" – and reproduces the sentence on the second page of his copy of *Ulysses* immediately beneath the title.

² For an analysis on the reception of *Ulysses* in Argentina see Novillo-Corvalán's aforementioned article, "Rereading Cortázar's *Rayuela* through Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Moveable Type* 4 (London: University College London, 2008): 56-84; for an analysis on the reception of it in Latin America see David Vela's "The voices of James Joyce in Latin American Literature," *Somos en escrito*, online, The Latino literary online magazine, Internet, 24 February 2016. Available: <http://www.somosescrito.com/2011/09/voices-of-james-joyce-in-latin-american.html>; and for a study on the Spanish translations of *Ulysses* see Patrick O'Neill, *Polyglot Joyce: Fictions of Translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 71-75.

publications in other magazines such as *Sur* and *El Hogar*.³ In fact, he takes note of *Sur* 78 and 122, and notes a reference to Gilbert's study, on the first page of his copy of *Ulysses*.⁴ On the other hand, in the late 1940s Cortázar also read and wrote about another pioneer Joycean writer from Buenos Aires: Leopoldo Marechal, whose novel, *Adán Buenosayres* (1948) [*Adam Buenosayres* (2014)], is considered the first Ulysean publication in Argentina.

Marechal's ambition was to offer an epic similar to the model followed by Joyce in *Ulysses*. The story of Adán Buenosayres unfolds over three days – 28, 29 and 30 of April of an unspecified year in the 1920s – in a suburban part of Buenos Aires, where they speak *lunfardo* – a particular variant of Spanish from the area of River Plate. Marechal wanted to do with Buenos Aires and *lunfardo* what Joyce had with Dublin and the Irish brogue. He thus engaged with *Ulysses* adapting the Joycean model to his own linguistic, historical and cultural experience, producing an enormous book that contains as many as seven books (although Marechal indicates in the prologue that the real “unpublished” novels written by Buenosayres are the last two: “El Cuaderno de Tapas Azules” and “Viaje a la oscura ciudad de Cacodelphia”). Cortázar, in “Leopoldo Marechal: *Adán Buenosayres*” (1949), a review he published in *Realidad*, describes the book as “un acontecimiento extraordinario en las letras argentinas” [“an extraordinary event in Argentine literature”]⁵, doubtless because he recognised Marechal's linguistic immediacy and social depiction of his own city. However, since Borges and most of the collaborators of the magazine *Sur* were anti-Peronists (the writer Eduardo González Lanuza, in fact, ridiculed

³ Borges publishes “La última hoja del Ulises” and “El Ulises de Joyce,” a translation that consists of just the last page of Joyce's text, accompanied by a brief analysis of *Ulysses* in *Proa* 6 (1925): 3-9. For an insightful analysis of this translation see Sergio Waisman, “Jorge Luis Borges's Partial Argentine *Ulysses*: A Foundational (Mis-)Translation,” *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 19.2 (2006): 37-51. For a reception of James Joyce in the Spanish newspapers see Carlos G. Santa Cecilia, *La recepción de James Joyce en la prensa española: 1921-1976* (Salamanca: Universidad de Sevilla, 1997).

⁴ Cortázar annotates *Sur* 78 and 122 surely because these two issues had essays on Joyce. Issue 78 has an essay by Armand Petitjean entitled “El tratamiento del lenguaje en Joyce,” *Sur* 78 (March 1941): 42-59; and issue 122 includes an essay by Stuart Gilbert entitled “El fondo latino en el arte de James Joyce,” *Sur* 122 (December 1944): 11-24. For more information about Cortázar's relationship with Borges and the magazine *Sur* see Eduardo Romano, “Julio Cortázar frente a Borges y el grupo de la revista *Sur*,” *Cuadernos hispanoamericanos* 364-366 (1980): 106-138.

⁵ Cortázar, “Leopoldo Marechal: *Adán Buenosayres*,” *Realidad, Revista de ideas* 5.14 (March-April 1949): 230.

Marechal's novel in one of their publications⁶), and Marechal, on the contrary, was an advocate for the President Juan Domingo Perón, Cortázar took something of a risk when he celebrated this novel as an "extraordinary event." Cortázar was an anti-Peronist when he lived in Argentina, but despite their ideological differences, he put his literary and Joycean interest forwards (an attitude that he continued to have towards the Cuban revolution, and which I will analyse in Chapter 6) and recognised what he concludes to be "un momento importante en nuestras desconcertadas letras. ... a los más jóvenes toca ver si actúa como fuerza viva, como enérgico empujón hacia lo de veras nuestro. Estoy entre los que creen esto último, y se obligan a no desconocerlo." ["an important moment for our bewildered literature. ... it is up to the young to see whether it acts as a live force, as an energetic push towards what is truly ours. I am among the ones who believe in the latter, and I oblige myself to not ignore him."]⁷ In fact, a few years later, when he was in Paris, Cortázar remembered this difficult decision: "dejé totalmente de lado mi opinión política con respecto a Marechal, a quien no conocía yo personalmente, y en cambio descubrí ahí a un gran escritor y a un hombre que estaba haciendo una tentativa en profundidad que no se había hecho hasta ese momento en la Argentina." ["I put aside my political view in regard to Marechal, whom I did not know personally, and I discovered a great writer and a man who was undertaking an attempt that had not yet been attempted in Argentina."]⁸ Cortázar explains he even received anonymous calls threatening him because some thought that he was becoming a Peronist with the publication of that article.

It is, then, unsurprising to find parallels between *Adán Buenosayres* and *Hopscotch*. They are both encyclopaedic novels which explore questions of Argentine identity and literary renovation.

Critics such as Beatriz Sarlo, in her review "*Rayuela*, de Julio Cortázar" (1985), says that

Hopscotch is an experimental novel linked to the European avant-garde, especially to surrealism and pataphysics (the science of imaginary solutions), but it also has distinctly

⁶ He writes: "Imaginad, si podéis, el *Ulises* escrito por el P. Coloma y abundantemente salpimentado de estiércol, y tendréis una idea bastante adecuada del libro." See review in *Sur*, 69 (November, 1948): 91.

⁷ Cortázar, "Leopoldo 236.

⁸ Saúl Sosnowski, "Julio Cortázar: modelos para desarmar," *Espejo de escritores*, ed. Reina Roffé (Hanover: Editorial del Norte, 1985) 51-52.

Argentine roots. In 1948, Julio Cortázar wrote the only comprehensive critical notes on a great novel by Leopoldo Marechal, *Adán Buenosayres*. *Hopscotch* is clearly related to this gigantic work by Marechal, which contains a little of everything from Dante's *Vita nuova* to a parody of the 1920s avant-garde of which Borges had been a part...⁹

Javier de Navascues argues that as well as their mutual search for an avant-garde identity, there is also the determination to begin a new era for the Argentine literary world in Cortázar's and Marechal's novels: "...existe en ambos un esfuerzo por abrir un camino propio y original a la novela argentina" ["...they both make an effort to open up a singular and original path for the Argentine novel"].¹⁰ Cortázar therefore not only recognised and celebrated Marechal's project, but also undertook a similar formal and innovative experiment in *Hopscotch*. In an early essay on the contemporary novel, Cortázar states that "la dicotomía fondo y forma marcha hacia su anulación, desde que la poesía es, como la música, su forma." ["the dichotomy of form and content marches to its cancellation, since poetry is, like music, its form."].¹¹ *Ulysses* and *Adán Buenosayres* are thus books which he enjoys because they abolish this frontier between the poetic and the novelistic. Joyce achieves a supreme combination of form and content and his writing represents, for Cortázar (in agreement with Eco), a combination that marks the difference between the contemporary novel and its predecessors.¹²

Beyond Marechal's influence, evidence indicates that Cortázar admires Joyce's narrative to the extent of considering it the recipient of the entire history of literature. In an interview with scholar Evelyn Picon Garfield, he says that "*Ulises* [sic] en alguna medida resume toda la literatura universal." ["*Ulysses*, in a certain way, resumes all the universal literature."].¹³ In another early essay, "Situación de la novela" (1950), he refers to this poetic attitude as the most distinctive trait of the contemporary novel and praises the free-associative tendency in *Ulysses*, as

⁹ Beatriz Sarlo, "Hopscotch," *The Novel*, vol.2, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 919-926.

¹⁰ For a comparative study of *Hopscotch* and *Adán Buenosayres* see Javier de Navascues's "Sobre novela argentina: *Rayuela* y *Adán Buenosayres*," *Rilce* 6.1 (1990): 65-82, 81.

¹¹ Cortázar, "Notas sobre la novela contemporánea," *Obra crítica*/2, ed. Jaime Alazraki (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1994) 147 (Cortázar's emphasis).

¹² Cortázar, "Notas 149 (Cortázar's emphasis).

¹³ Picon Garfield, "Cortázar por Cortázar," *Quadernos de Texto Crítico*, 4 (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1978): 41.

well as its musicality. He even gives it an epithet, calling *Ulysses* an “empresa sinfónica” [“symphonic enterprise”]¹⁴ because, like Eco – who we have seen focuses his theories of the open work upon Serialist music – Cortázar believes that only music is capable of achieving the highest and most authentic representation of the poetic form. Cortázar states that “[d]e la empresa sinfónica que es *Ulysses*, especie de muestrario técnico, se desprenden por influencia o coincidencia, las muchas ramas de este impulso común.” [“From the sort of symphonic enterprise which is *Ulysses*, a sort of technical sample board, comes off through influence or chance all the branches of this mutual impulse.”]¹⁵ Here Cortázar explicitly refers to the novels of his contemporaries, though we can safely assume a relevance to his own style in these lines.

In his copy of *Ulysses* Cortázar underlines various passages, particularly those containing linguistic gimmicks, experiments with sound and intertextualities. He underlines, for instance, the passage: “I zmelz de bloodz odz an Iridzman” and annotates: “Fee-fo-fum, the giant” referring to the English folktale *Jack and the Beanstalk*.¹⁶ As we shall see, such preoccupation with language is displayed throughout *Hopscotch*. Cortázar also mentions Joyce on three occasions within *Hopscotch*, in Chapters 79, 95 and 97, always through Morelli, the experimental writer/character of the novel, presumably because Cortázar links Stephen’s discussions about the creative process to Morelli’s reflections on writing. Thus in *Hopscotch* we read the following (the ironic authorial distance is typical of Cortázar’s approach in such cases): “A esas partes del libro Morelli las llamaba ‘arquepítulos,’ y ‘capetipos,’ adefesios verbales donde se adivinaba una mezcla no por nada joyciana.” [“Those sections of the book Morelli called ‘archapters’ and ‘chaptypes,’ verbal nonsense in which one could deduce a mixture that was not in the least Joycean.”]¹⁷ We see, then, that when Morelli/Cortázar mentions Joyce, it is always either in reference to language and the new form of the novel or in reference to humour, particularly in reference to the importance

¹⁴ Cortázar, “Situación de la novela,” *Obra crítica*/2 229.

¹⁵ Cortázar, “Situación 229.

¹⁶ The old rhyme from obscure origins, first appears in Thomas Nashe’s *Have with You to Saffron-Walden* in 1596 as “Fy, Fa and fum, / I smell the bloud of an Englishman,” and in *King Lear* Shakespeare puts these words into the mouth of Edgar: “Fie, foh, and fum, / I smell the blood of a British man.”

¹⁷ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 600; *Hopscotch* 431.

of these elements in order to break down the walls of traditional form. When writing about his ideal novel, Morelli says that he would like to create a comic novel, mentioning *Ulysses*: “Para ese lector, *mon semblable, mon frère*, la novela cómica (¿y qué es el *Ulysses*?) deberá transcurrir como esos sueños en los que al margen de un acaecer trivial presentimos una carga más grave que no siempre alcanzamos a desentrañar.” [“For that reader, *mon semblable, mon frère*, the comic novel (and what is *Ulysses*?) will have to take place like those dreams in the margin of some trivial happening we have a presentiment of a more serious anxiety that we do not always manage to decipher.”]¹⁸

Many critics have commented on Cortázar’s reception of Joyce and about his playfulness with language in *Hopscotch* as a development of his reading of the Irish author. The critic E. Joseph Sharkey, for instance, compares the use of the letter “h” by the main character of *Hopscotch*, Horacio Oliveira, to Stephen’s use of humour. Oliveira adds the letter “h” in front of those words he finds pompous, too literary and grandiloquent (in Spanish the letter “h” has no sound, and so it is considered useless, and Gregory Rabassa – the English translator of the novel – uses the English equivalent “wh”). Examples include: “‘El gran hasunto’ ... hescribía Holoveira. ‘El hego y el hotro.’ ... ‘Lo importante es no hinflarse’” [“‘The great whaffair’ ... wrote Wholiveira. ‘The whego and the whother.’ ... ‘The whimportant thing is not to become whinflated’”].¹⁹ He uses the “h,” then, to remind us of the futility of language and to distance himself from his serious concerns about life. Words that are too grandiloquent, like “ego” or even the character’s own name, Oliveira, provoke a mocking reflection when preceded by an absurd and insignificant letter. Stephen, according to Sharkey, does something similar as he also turns “to humour to free himself from his self-enthrallment.”²⁰ They both use irony as a momentary and illusory escape from the crude reality in which they dwell, a situation that has become aggravated by the time of Cortázar’s work in the early 1960s. Actually, Sharkey even insists that *Hopscotch* ends with

¹⁸ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 561; *Hopscotch* 397-398.

¹⁹ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 581; *Hopscotch* 416.

²⁰ E. Joseph Sharkey, *Idling the Engine: Linguistic Skepticism in and around Cortázar, Kafka, and Joyce* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 193.

Oliveira's suicide because he believes that Cortázar's character is a frustrated intellectual like Stephen, who carries the weight of history like the young Irishman; something which I will argue to be unlikely due to Cortázar's ironic approach.

Cortázar's preoccupation with language, then, is comparable to Joyce's and extends across his oeuvre. However, the theories of Cortázar's alter-ego Morelli and Joyce's practices are not always of an exactly similar nature. On one level, the sort of experiment that Morelli proposes in *Hopscotch* involves going back to the word in order to rethink its meaning and its adjustment to reality. Indeed, Morelli wants to realise his theoretical concerns by way of the removal of any unnecessary literary artifice from his writing, and defends a process of purification to overcome vacuous and overused expressions:

Después de todo podirse significa terminar con la impureza de los compuestos y devolver sus derechos al sodio, al magnesio, al carbono químicamente puros. Mi prosa se pudre sintácticamente y avanza – con tanto trabajo – hacia la simplicidad. Creo que por eso ya no sé escribir “coherente.”

After all, rotting means the end of the impurities in the component parts and the return of rights to chemically pure sodium, magnesium, carbon. My prose is rotting syntactically and is heading – with so much work – towards simplicity. I think that is why I no longer know how to write “coherent.”²¹

Morelli is looking for a minimalist *exclusion* instead of an epic, “Joycean” *inclusion*. His solution involves getting back to basics and restarting the whole system, even if that writing reflects an incoherent chaosmos. On another level, Cortázar's stylistic concerns are less about melding the language with particular actions via a single character as in *Ulysses* (particularly to the schematic reader Gilbert) than allowing a dialogue between the different voices that surrounded the author in Paris. Ossip Gregorovius, Perico Romero, Traveler, Talita, la Maga, Pola, Oliveira, Wong, Ronald, Etienne and Babs are some of the voices through which Cortázar scatters his concerns about a variety of current topics, such as the Algerian war, free jazz, torture in China and avant-garde art. Furthermore, Cortázar introduces materials from various genres in *Hopscotch*, from newspaper articles to script dialogues that broaden those voices even more. Collage, which he

²¹ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 598; *Hopscotch* 429.

would develop further and master in his later works, allows a “symphonic enterprise” similar to the one that we find in Joyce’s novel. Cristina Feijóo states that this generic crossover is what makes *Hopscotch* what Eco “would call an ‘open work,’”²² while Juan Loveluck says that to understand *Hopscotch* we need to revisit Eco’s “*poética de la forma abierta*” [“*poetics of the open form*”],²³ because, like Joyce, its greatest success comes from “la fusión de su *forma* – o su *aforma* – con la variedad de *mundo representado*: el mundo como caos, el mundo como cambio, el mundo como calidoscopio.” [“the fusion of its form, or a-form, with the variety of the *represented world*: the world as chaos, the world as change, the world as kaleidoscope.”]²⁴ Cortázar’s narrative, however, does not have the same degree of chaotic polymorphism that Joyce’s work achieves. On the contrary, Cortázar maintains a similar tone throughout. Even if Cortázar sets up dialogues among his characters and even between different genres, he does not switch between narrative styles. Indeed, only Giordana Yovanovich notes that Cortázar’s polyphonic enterprise is something that differentiates *Hopscotch* from *Ulysses*, due to the former’s aims for clarity.²⁵

Cortázar’s writing, then, incorporates a discernibly Joycean inheritance at a time when the new Latin American novel was spreading through Europe. According to many commentators, this new Latin American novel was deeply influenced by the work of Joyce. Gerald Martin even affirms that the writers of the Latin American Boom (Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, José Donoso and Carlos Fuentes, among others) were not only following Joyce but that “Latin America was now fully ready for the ‘Joycean’ moment of consciousness.”²⁶ Indeed, Marechal’s *Adán Buenosayres*, *Hopscotch*, but also Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres* (1967) and José Donoso’s *El obscuro pájaro de la noche* (1970), opened up the terrain for a new kind of literature

²² Cristina Feijóo, “El pensamiento de Cortázar en *Rayuela*,” *La máquina del tiempo, una revista de literatura*, online, La máquina del tiempo, Internet, 4 March 2015. Available: <http://www.lamaquinadel tiempo.com/cortazar/feijoo.htm>

²³ Juan Loveluck, “Aproximación a *Rayuela*,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 36.65 (1968): 88.

²⁴ Loveluck 93.

²⁵ Giordana Yovanovich, *Julio Cortázar’s Character Mosaic, Reading the Longer Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 56.

²⁶ Gerald Martin, “Boom, Yes: ‘New’ Novel, No: Further Reflections on the Optical Illusions of the 1960s in Latin America,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 3.2 (1984): 55. On the Latin American moment of consciousness see Ana María Simo et al. *Cinco miradas sobre Cortázar*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1968) and Martin 53-63.

that influenced later authors such as Roberto Bolaño, and a young generation of Argentinean writers that Cortázar himself refers to in the interview with Picon Garfield when he admits that his book “ha modificado profundamente una buena parte de la literatura de ficción latinoamericana en estos últimos diez años. El impacto de *Rayuela* en los jóvenes que en ese momento empezaban a escribir ha sido enorme.” [“has deeply modified an important part of the Latin American’s fiction of these last ten years. *Hopscotch*’s impact among young writers who are beginning their careers has been tremendous.”]²⁷ It was due to this reception of Cortázar’s work that critics like Ana María Simo began to consider *Hopscotch* the Latin American equivalent of *Ulysses*. More specifically, in a discussion about *Hopscotch* with Roberto Fernández Retamar and José Lezama Lima (another considerable Joycean Latin American writer of the so-called Boom), Simo states that Cortázar contributed with “la novela del lenguaje” [“the language novel”]²⁸ a literary project that, as we have seen, questions the correlation of language to the real and to its own nature, just as Joyce did in *Ulysses*. In fact, Simo and Retamar endorse the position that *Hopscotch* is to South America what *Ulysses* is to the English and Irish literary tradition.²⁹ These authors, however, do not mention that South America is imperialistically similar to Ireland, and that the two novels involve a rethinking of both the language of the coloniser and the assimilated language of the colonised. On the contrary, Lezama Lima includes *Ulysses* in a general Western literary tradition, affirming that *Hopscotch* is a “sunset novel” of that praxis, ending the experimental enterprise inaugurated by Joyce. In his own words:

Joyce es un hombre que inaugura nuevas perspectivas de la literatura, es un hombre absolutamente nuevo en nuestra época. Su aporte es colosal: de ninguna manera puede establecerse un paralelo entre el *Ulysses* [sic] de Joyce, y Cortázar. En mi opinión carece de fundamento.

Joyce is a man who inaugurates new perspectives for literature, is a completely new man for our age. His contribution is colossal: in no possible way can any parallelisms be established between Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Cortázar. In my opinion, the argument has no foundation.³⁰

²⁷ Picon Garfield, “Cortázar 41.

²⁸ Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *El boom de la novela latinoamericana; ensayo* (Caracas: Editorial Tiempo Nuevo, 1972) 82.

²⁹ Simo et al. 49.

³⁰ Simo et al. 49.

Lezama Lima is not interested in the Latin American “moment of consciousness” or the importance of a book like *Hopscotch* for their scene. He understands Joyce’s work, and Late Modernism in general, as an aesthetic revolution that had an international impact in which Latin America was included, simply for being already part of that literary European network and, therefore, he insists that *Hopscotch* represents the remains of that Joycean explosion, and the closure of that experimental moment (which in Argentina, as we have seen, began with Marechal). But his statement does not change Simo’s and Retamar’s opinion, who continue to agree with the importance of *Hopscotch* for the Latin American literary scene because of its enormous influence as well as its capacity to open up new territories for literary experiment. Simo and Retamar, however, by emphasising the “Joycean moment,” do not question whether these experiments are a positive achievement for Latin America, but assume that they constitute a good “progress” towards a contemporaneity that originates in Europe. They do not bring up that Joyce is critical about the reproduction of Western-European literary models like Cortázar, and just praise Cortázar for being the author of the “Joycean” Latin American novel, in a way endorsing the “moment of consciousness” mentioned above and failing to tackle the blatant criticism beyond both projects.

Patricia Novillo-Corvalán, in her article “Rereading Cortázar’s *Rayuela* through Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” draws attentions to this criticism. She argues that both novels can be read through the alienation and exile of their main characters: Oliveira is an Argentine intellectual in Paris, Bloom a Jew in Ireland, Stephen an unwilling British citizen in Dublin, and la Maga a Uruguayan former prostitute in Paris. This has ramifications in the writers’ representation of the artist as an intellectual impaired and devoured by his own knowledge, as well as his will to stand up against that knowledge because it has been inherited from his imperial country. Novillo-Corvalán expresses these tensions with great power:

Yet as much as Oliveira is linked with Bloom as urban wanderer, reader, and frustrated lover, he also bears an even more striking set of parallels with Stephen Dedalus. Both are aspiring

artists and solipsistic intellectuals who distrust the languages they inherited from their imperial powers, Britain and Spain. They ascribe to the rebellious satanic dictum *non serviam* and question the spheres of reason of the Western world.³¹

According to this reading, *Hopscotch* is not a “sunset novel,” but a work that continues to unfold the new chaosmos inaugurated by Joyce. Something that Lezama Lima does not mention, however, and which I think separates this new generation from Late Modernism, is a sense of repetition that almost collects earlier experimental practices. Cortázar is not just a Joycean follower but, as he states on repeated occasions, he is also an admirer of the work of Surrealist authors such as René Crevel, Jacques Vaché and Arthur Cravan.³² Certainly, his work not only stems from High Modernist practices but also from French Existentialism³³ and even Dada’s collage techniques. John Barth, in “The Literature of Exhaustion” states that what differentiates High Modernism from the next thing – which critics would soon label Postmodernism – is that the work reflects upon itself, specially upon literary conventions and its own elaboration rather than upon the object represented.³⁴ This, once more, supports my thesis about experimentalism. Furthermore, I contend that authors like Cortázar contribute to change the meaning that literary experiment had for Surrealism, Dada and even Existentialism. Instead of being preoccupied with how his writing will modify the role of art in society, he pays attention to what happens after it: to how the high reproducibility of his book will induce several readings and interpretations. Lida Aronne Amestoy, in *La novela mandala* (1972), is of the same opinion when she affirms that Cortázar’s concern is not so much centred on the form of the narrative itself but on the participation of the reader in the process of reading, on whether the reading will modify the experience of reception, because “[s]u propósito no parece estar tanto en la obra como antes o después de ella. No quiere instaurar un nuevo tipo de personaje ni un nuevo método para revelarlo, como *Ulysses*; apunta más bien a un lector nuevo desde un escritor también diferente.”

³¹ Novillo-Corvalán 71.

³² Picon Garfield, *¿Es Julio* 11.

³³ For an insightful analysis of Cortázar’s Existentialism, see Kathleen Genover, *Claves de una novelística existencial en Rayuela de Cortázar* (Madrid: Playor, 1973).

³⁴ Barth, *The Friday* 200.

["Its purpose does not seem to be as much *in* the work as *before* and *after* it. It does not want to introduce a new sort of character or a new method to reveal him, like *Ulysses*; it is addressed, instead, to a new reader from a different writer."]³⁵ Which takes us back to Eco's description of the open work and the model reader. Yovanovich, also following Eco's ideas, expresses that *Ulysses* and *Hopscotch* demand a different reader:

Most modernist writers turned their texts into puzzles that readers had to solve. This entanglement made for demanding reading, even for Umberto Eco's "super reader" ... Joyce would be a case of this extremely intellectual demand but *Hopscotch*, in contrast, is an agile novel; Cortázar strives for the enjoyment of the game.³⁶

This emphasis on the "enjoyment of the game" favours Barth's views in "The Literature of Exhaustion," with the self-referentiality that Cortázar introduces in the Expendable Chapters via Morelli representing the necessary step towards postmodernism which Barth defined as the moment when the work begins to focus more on its elaboration than on the finished and represented object.³⁷ Graciela De Sola states that despite the influence of Joyce in *Hopscotch*, there is in Cortázar "el esfuerzo racional y ordenado de una comunicación efectiva" ["the rational and ordered effort of an effective communication."]³⁸ De Sola, writes that *Hopscotch* is a "work in progress" in which Cortázar "pone totalmente de manifiesto su intención de "mostrar el juego" ["totally manifests his intention of "showing the game"],³⁹ thus the experimental project that he presents, as I will explain in the following sections, focuses on making and is not constricted by intellectual demands. *Hopscotch* is written after the creation of that new chaosmos which Eco attributes to Joyce, but it also displays new and actual preoccupations with the reception of the work that were connected to experimentalism in the 1960s. In fact, a reading of *Hopscotch* in parallel to Eco's ideas of the open work and the work in progress will offer a new appreciation of *Hopscotch* and how it has been approached. *Hopscotch* can be better understood if we unravel this dialogue with openness, as Cortázar and Morelli propose in the novel.

³⁵ Amestoy 22.

³⁶ Yovanovich 26.

³⁷ Barth, *The Friday* 200.

³⁸ De Sola 103.

³⁹ De Sola 92.

2. *Hopscotch*, Open Work or Work in Progress?

Eco writes that Cortázar's work is fundamentally experimental. Borrowing from the lexicon of music he suggests that Cortázar creates "atonal" stories: "Non c'è bisogno di pensare a favole troppo 'atonali' (benché ci stiano anche quelle, dal *nouveau roman* a Borges e a Cortázar [sic], o alle storie raccontate dai film di Antonioni)" ["There is no need to think about stories that are too "atonal" (although there are also such stories; from the *nouveau roman* or Borges and Cortázar, or the stories told in the films of Antonioni)"].⁴⁰ In this section I will unveil why Eco conceives of Cortázar as a writer prone to openness and experimentation, but firstly I will address the misunderstanding that the concept of openness still stirs up in today's critical climate.

Returning to Eco's book, *The Open Work*, we find that he already predicts a possible misreading of openness when he says that it "still requires to be separated from other conventional applications of this term."⁴¹ The following comparative study therefore examines certain biased uses of the term in critical studies on Cortázar's criticism and, at the same time, sheds light onto the differences between open work and work in progress through *Hopscotch*. In the previous chapter we have seen that Eco studies Joyce's break with tradition and provides an approach towards the particular situation of experimentalism in the early 1960s in which Cortázar's work is immersed, hence the importance of studying the relation between this break from Aquinas, Cortázar's reception of *Ulysses*, and *Hopscotch* in order to see whether Eco's ideas of openness are still fruitful to the understanding of literary experiment in that context.

In Cortázar's novel form and content create a dialogue in which the reader assumes a central role. Regarding its structure, for instance, the reader is asked to psychologically manipulate the book in order to follow the story. *Hopscotch* can be read in different orders following at least two

⁴⁰ Eco, *Lector* 121. Antonioni adapts Cortázar's short-story "Las babas del diablo" from *Las armas secretas* (1959) into his famous film *Blow-up* (1966).

⁴¹ Eco, *The Open* 3.

systems, and it will be the reader's choice to follow one or the other. This choice is possible because the novel is divided into three parts: the first set in Paris and called "Del lado de allá" ["From the Other Side"], the second in Buenos Aires and called "Del lado de acá" ["From this Side"] and the third called "De otros lados: capítulos prescindibles" ["From Diverse Sides: Expendable Chapters"], which is a collage of disparate texts that include additional material about the main characters, newspaper clippings, external dialogues and quotations that can be interpolated throughout the other two sections. On the first page of *Hopscotch* Cortázar includes a "Tablero de Instrucciones" ["Table of Instructions"] in which he indicates that there are different ways, at least two, of approaching the novel. He suggests that readers begin at Chapter 73, and then jump between the numbers of the chapters as a child might jump upon a hopscotch grid. On the other hand, if they prefer to read the book in the sequence of chapter numbers (Cortázar explicitly indicates that the three asterisks following Chapter 56 are equivalent to the word "Fin" ["End"]) they finish the novel knowing that it is incomplete; that the *Hopscotch* they have put down is just a part of that book. Regarding this second option, however, Cortázar says that the reader "prescindirá sin remordimientos de lo que sigue" ["may ignore what follows with a clear conscience"]⁴² which is something to bear in mind when I discuss the critical interpretations of the work's structural "openness." In fact, we will see that this marginal comment has been overlooked by Cortázar's most significant critics such as Ana María Barrenechea and Kathleen Genover, even though it tells us the extent to which Cortázar wanted the novel to be left to the reader's free will – similarly to Pousseur's musical invitation to a "field of possibilities" that Eco explains in *The Open Work* as a central feature of the work in progress.⁴³ Another important difference between these two orderings is the way in which the book ends: the consecutive turning of the pages discloses a more or less linear story with a beginning and an end, while the other reading, the one that demands a more active physical collaboration, has a

⁴² Cortázar, *Rayuela* Tablero de dirección; *Hopscotch* Table of Instructions.

⁴³ Eco quotes Pousseur's description of his musical composition, *Scambi*, as a "field of possibilities, an explicit invitation to exercise choice." Eco, *The Open* 1.

beginning but no end. In this reading the same story is expanded and interrupted with disordered materials until you reach the last chapter, number 131, at which point you are invited to keep jumping between Chapters 58 and 131 forever. In both readings the same story is narrated, but the option of hopping through the chapters provides extra information from the Expendable Chapters (mostly comments about writing introduced by the character Morelli) that contribute extra breadth to the main story.

Due to these different orderings some critics have stressed the existence of two *Hopscotch(es)*. Genover and Barrenechea, for instance, insist on this division. Barrenechea differentiates two levels of reality in the novel: one profound and one superficial that, according to her, repeat the division of human beings between surface and depth: “Al proponer dos [lecturas] el autor revela la estructura de un mundo con dos capas diferentes de penetración, mejor quizá la doble estructura de la experiencia de aprehensión del mundo.” [“In proposing two [readings] the author reveals the structure of a world with two different layers of penetration, perhaps the double structure of experience in apprehending the world.”]⁴⁴ Genover, similarly, notes that one reading is the “novela-novela” whereas the other is the “verdadera *Rayuela*”⁴⁵ [“real *Hopscotch*”] or the “antinovela-novela.”⁴⁶ The reader, according to Genover, cooperates with the author in the process of reading/re-writing the novel, assuming a creative role and experiencing the writing process in a similar way to the author. Barrenechea’s and Genover’s readings are, however, dualistic and do not help to appreciate the complexities of the novel. It should not be claimed, as Genover does, that the “real *Hopscotch*” involves a completely free and “open” reading while the other reading does not. This is a false dichotomy because *Hopscotch* is just one novel, with the peculiarity that it can be shorter or longer, depending on how the reader wants to approach it. For Genover “open” seems a synonym of freedom, but she forgets that Cortázar includes a table of *instructions* that tells us exactly what to do with the “real *Hopscotch*,” also the fact the book

⁴⁴ Ana María Barrenechea, “La estructura de *Rayuela*, de Julio Cortázar,” *Nueva novela latinoamericana*, vol. 2, ed. Jorge Lafforgue (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 1972) 231.

⁴⁵ Genover 20.

⁴⁶ Genover 24.

contains a plot that unfolds linearly through a series of consecutively numbered (and ordered) chapters cannot be ignored. The reader, in fact, will probably follow Cortázar's scheme and will not embark upon his/her own ordering strategies. What Genover does not account for is that readers are not active because they are free to do as they please; they are active because they are following a constraint, since they have been made aware of the different levels of signification at work and it requires an effort – certainly more than one reading – to identify and grasp them. The physical jumping through the chapters is an analogy for that active collaboration, not the opposite side to the “superficial reading” of the “novel-novel.” Surely Barrenechea provides an accurate interpretation when she states that even the “superficial” way of reading the novel is experimental because, according to her, “muestra una tensión lírica, unas discusiones filosóficas y literarias y un fragmentarismo que no son los habituales en la ‘novela rollo’” [“it displays a lyrical tension, with philosophical and literary discussions and a fragmentation that are not usual of the ‘boring novel’”], but she is still approaching the two orderings as separate novels.⁴⁷ Steven Boldy resolves this tension when he writes that

Hopscotch is not a totally open, aleatory novel, nor, as many detractors and enthusiasts agree, is everything left to the reader, whom they would have as a mysterious new animal recently invented by Cortázar. The reader is drawn into a bewildered but deep and critical commitment to his reading and involvement in the novel, by sometimes unconventional, but often conventional means.⁴⁸

The complexity of the structure should not be reduced to a Manichean choice between two readings. Boldy is right to insist that Cortázar's objective is to achieve a “deep and critical commitment” on part of the reader, as he understands that openness as a category represents the dialectical tension between freedom and order, or between chance and constraint, which better elucidates Eco's understanding of the open work.⁴⁹

Indeed, it is unquestionable that if the reader favours the option suggested on the table of instructions, he/she thereby becomes the sort of reader Morelli calls the “accomplice reader.”

⁴⁷ Barrenechea 233.

⁴⁸ Boldy 30.

⁴⁹ See Introduction.

because they agree to play a game with the author. Morelli's unusual books are read and discussed by the intellectual and bohemian members of the Club de la Serpiente [The Serpent Club]: a group of Bohemian friends with whom the main character spends most of his time in Paris. This avant-garde writer, then, might fulfil the role of Cortázar's alter ego, although, when we compare the novel *Hopscotch* to Morelli's ideas, we soon realise that they sometimes disagree in their practices or, at least, there is a tension between them. Morelli strenuously praises the accomplice reader, while Cortázar wants to offer us a more relaxed invitation, and thus he writes that we "may ignore what follows with a clear conscience" – referring to the information scattered through the Expendable Chapters. Morelli is therefore depicted as an avant-garde writer with a clear ideology and difficult aesthetics, while Cortázar is more inclined to give the reader the responsibility to make his/her own decisions. This could be read as the step towards postmodernism that I was addressing in the last section, in which Morelli plays the role of the avant-gardist writer and Cortázar becomes the postmodern writer.

However, among Morelli's experiments we also find postmodern characteristics. For example, the book he describes is never completed, at the same time as his description becomes a book (*Hopscotch* itself). Perhaps a more helpful way of pinning down Cortázar's experimentalism, then, would be to analyse Morelli's connection to Eco's theoretical assumptions about the new novel. In order to achieve his experimental purposes Morelli discusses a particular set of ideas that coincide with Eco's thoughts on reception. Morelli insists, for instance, that the work will require, among other things, a committed reader who is, basically, a reader who undergoes a similar experience to that of the author "*en el mismo momento y en la misma forma*" ["*at the same moment and in the same form*"]⁵⁰ as he asserts in a formulation that is close to Eco's description of the experience of the model reader. Eco also regards openness as intentional and therefore a part of the aesthetic programme of the artist. When he analyses Ian Fleming's novels, Eco states that in most detective stories the plot aims at a resolution, no matter how many threads there are or

⁵⁰ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 560; *Hopscotch* 397 (Cortázar's emphasis).

how many situations have been left unresolved. Openness, on the contrary, is the sort of writing that constantly produces new and disparate divagations. Open novels do not contain a mystery to solve but an exploration of meaning that reproduces more authentically the context that the author (and the reader at the time) dwells in. According to Eco, “[t]he author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader [Model Reader] supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions *in the same way* as the author deals generatively with them.”⁵¹ This is what Morelli asks for when he writes that the reader is expected to undergo a similar experience to that of the author.

Nevertheless, Cortázar’s overall project seems to differ from that of Morelli because he does not want to restrict the reading to the “Tablero de Instrucciones,” or he would not have introduced another possible order to begin with. His aim is more in tune with Eco’s description of Mallarmé’s *Le Livre*, since he wants a book that does not exhaust its readings, just as Mallarmé wanted a novel that included the whole universe. In fact, this is an aestheticism of Romantic roots that Cortázar already explored in his early poetry.⁵² The fact that he introduces a very definite order (in order to suggest that infinity) reminds us of how Mallarmé described his oeuvre/universe: “Mon ouvre est si bien préparé et hiérarchisé, représentant comme il le peut, l’Univers, que je n’aurais su, sans endommager quelque’une de mes impressions étagées, rien en enlever.” [“My work is so well prepared and organised, representing as it may be, the Universe, that I could not have anything removed without damaging some of my impressions of its layers.”]⁵³ Lucy Bell also underlines this “false polarity” in Cortázar’s short stories, contending that they are not closed, orthodox forms, but “open doors” to new worlds: “the short story closure and enclosure are in fact paradoxically a means of producing open texts.”⁵⁴ In *La vuelta al*

⁵¹ Eco, *The Role* 7 (my emphasis).

⁵² See, for example, Cortázar’s book of poems published under the pseudonym Julio Denis, *Presencia* (Buenos Aires: El Bibliófilo, 1938). For an insightful study of his Romantic roots see Emilio R. Báez Rivera, “Inversión e invención de imágenes y espejos: el ‘poeticismo’ romántico de Julio Cortázar en su narrativa breve a la luz de John Keats,” *Alpha* 20 (2004): 29-51.

⁵³ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondances II*, eds. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 99.

⁵⁴ Lucy Bell, *The Latin American Short Story at its Limits* (London: Legenda, 2014) 68 and 70.

día en ochenta mundos (1967), while discussing what he understands as fantastic literature, Cortázar writes that “[e]l orden será siempre abierto, no se tenderá jamás a una conclusión porque nada concluye ni nada empieza en un sistema del que solo se poseen coordenadas inmediatas.” [“The order will always be open, a conclusion will never be sought because nothing concludes or begins in a system of which we only possess immediate co-ordinates.”]⁵⁵ Here we find the dialectical tension I am pointing at: on the one hand, there is an order that has been intentionally set up by the author whereas, at the same time, the narrative is open because this order creates disparate layers of meaning.

Mallarmé never finished his epic enterprise. Instead, he gathered most of his extant writings for *Le Livre* in a volume entitled *Divagations* (1897), which is predominantly made up of essays on writing and about how *Le Livre* should have been. This, in turn, brings into mind the word “Almanaque” [“Almanac”]⁵⁶ that Morelli often uses to describe his project. Similarly, had Morelli finished his experimental book, he would have turned it into a gathering of “divagations” in a Mallarmean sense (in fact, what are the Expendable Chapters if not “divagations”?) because he is unable to finish his book: “Le gustaría *dibujar* ciertas ideas, pero es incapaz de hacerlo. Los diseños que aparecen al margen de sus notas son pésimos. ... Proyecta uno de los muchos fines de su libro inconcluso, y deja una maqueta.” [“He would like to *sketch* certain ideas, but he is incapable of doing so. The designs which appear in the margins of his notes are terrible. ... He plans one of the many endings to his unfinished book, and he leaves a mockup.”]⁵⁷ This mockup consists of a wall of words that read: “Underneath it all he knew that one cannot go beyond because there isn’t any.” But at the bottom of the page, Morelli indicates that in one of the sentences the word *any* is missing, and thus only “[u]n ojo sensible descubre el hueco entre los ladrillos, la luz que pasa.” [“[a] sensitive eye can discover the hole among the bricks, the light that

⁵⁵ Cortázar, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1967) 71-72.

⁵⁶ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 531; *Hopscotch* 370.

⁵⁷ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 531; *Hopscotch* 370.

shows through.”]”⁵⁸ The admission of a metaphysical defeat in the expression “there is no beyond” is humorously turned into “there is an infront” (or “a hole among the bricks”), that only the active reader would be able to spot. In the next section, through an analysis of *Hopscotch*’s plot, I will study this tension between Morelli’s aesthetic ideology and Cortázar’s playful (and anti-political) *laissez faire*; two sides of a thaumatrope that express that metaphysical defeat.

3. Utopian Quests & Experimentalism

Cortázar commented directly on Eco’s notion of the open work, admitting that *Hopscotch* can be read in this manner, but he also argued that openness was not only related to structural concerns. For Cortázar openness also involves the adoption of a new perspective that has more to do with Oliveira’s search than the structure of the novel as such:

Mira, cuando apareció la teoría de Umberto Eco de la obra abierta empezaron a decir algunos críticos que *Rayuela* es una obra abierta, y efectivamente es una especie de proposición abierta que tú tomas por donde quieras. También Horacio es una proposición abierta; yo me niego a que él se termine. Incluso el hecho de que no decidí si se mata o no se mata es la mejor prueba de que le estoy dando una libertad final en la que él hará lo que quiera ya por fuera del libro.

Look, when Umberto Eco’s theory about the open work appeared some critics began to say that *Hopscotch* is an open work, and it is effectively a sort of open invitation that you take however you prefer. Also Horacio is an open invitation: I deny to myself that he finishes. Even the fact that I did not decide whether he killed himself or not is the best proof that I am giving him a final freedom in which he will do whatever he wants beyond the book.⁵⁹

Cortázar’s suggestion that Oliveira’s is an open quest takes us, then, a step further from Eco’s analysis of “formativity.” Until now, my approach to Cortázar’s novel has been structural, but it is germane here to note that the characters are also non-finished propositions that pursue a utopian enterprise. *Hopscotch*, as I will argue, is charged with a specific utopian content, and an

⁵⁸ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 531; *Hopscotch* 370.

⁵⁹ Ana María Hernández, “Conversación con Julio Cortázar,” *Julio Cortázar*, Rayuela, ed. Julio Ortega and Saúl Yurkievich (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994) 732.

analysis of this content will illustrate the new meanings that literary experimentation was acquiring in the early 1960s.

We know that Oliveira is depicted as an Argentinean intellectual living in Paris, leading a Bohemian lifestyle apparently detached from the bourgeois establishment that undergirds it. He survives on a pension that he receives from a relative in Buenos Aires and dwells in a difficult psychological and physical situation. In fact, he is unable to resolve this situation, mainly because he rejects Western Capitalism, a system that, according to him, alienates the individual to the extent that even political action and rebellion are thought to be part of that alienation. It is for this reason, for instance, that Oliveira decides not to take part in the Algerian protests going on in Paris at the time. In a complex interior monologue he says that “[h]acía mal en no luchar por la independencia argelina, o contra el antisemitismo o el racismo. Hacia bien en negarse al fácil estupefaciente de la acción colectiva y quedarse otra vez solo frente al mate amargo” “[h]e was wrong in not fighting for Algerian independence, or against anti-Semitism or racism. He was right in rejecting the simple stupefaction of collective action and remaining alone once more next to his bitter *mate*”] because “¿cuál era la verdadera moral de la acción? ... Siempre se es santo a costa de otro, etc.” [“what was the true morality of action? ... One is always a saint at the expense of somebody else, etc.”] To which he concludes that “[a]llí donde cierto tipo humano podía realizarse como héroe, Oliveira se sabía condenado a la peor de las comedias. Entonces valía más pecar por omisión que por comisión.” “[t]here where a certain human type could reach fulfillment as a hero, Oliveira knew that he was condemned to the worst of comedies. So it was better to sin through omission than through commission.”⁶⁰ Because of these comments we realise that Oliveira is quite a conventional character. His detached and relativistic thinking could easily be found in the Existentialist novels of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, the nihilistic work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline or even the Bohemian novels of the *fin de siècle*. Oliveira, however, in spite of his destructive behaviour, believes that life can be different and that this

⁶⁰ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 582-583; *Hopscotch* 417-418.

difference needs to be explored beyond dualisms because “en este mundo las síntesis últimas están por descubrirse” [“in this world ultimate syntheses are yet to be discovered.”]⁶¹ This hope, different from the natural pessimism of decadentism, drives Oliveira, in one memorable scene, to explore reality in unusual ways and become involved in a series of bizarre situations just to find a sugar-cube under a table in a bourgeois restaurant. In fact, the search for the sugar-cube in the first chapter of the novel establishes from the start the kind of comical periplum that Oliveira will go through in order to find his centre of the “mandala:” a place that, according to him, will restore meaning to the world, offering him the possibility of living a more authentic existence.⁶²

The path Oliveira has to walk is challenging, mainly because the conquest of the centre of that mandala – which he refers to in various mythical, mystical ways, calling it Ygdrassil, Reino Milenario, Kibbutz del deseo and Arcadia – is a mission that requires the renunciation of all that he had learned so far, and a reimagining of rationalist modernism. Western man has developed traditions that are very difficult to abandon, but it is nonetheless necessary to step back and rethink the system entirely, beginning with language, because the rational tools that our society has given us are dated and worthless: “Lo que me revienta es la manía de las explicaciones, el Logos entendido exclusivamente como verbo.” [“What I can’t stand is this mania for explanations, the Logos understood exclusively as a verb.”]⁶³ says Oliveira’s friend Etienne, in agreement with the character’s rejection of pre-established language. Even though reasoning is subject to language, it is *res* not only *verba* what needs to change. Cortázar uses language to communicate the need of a new language, but he does so through a thoughtful narrative, the narrative that Morelli wants to purify from any conventional or given formulae. De Sola notes this when she says that Cortázar is looking for a true language: “No se trata de experimentalismo

⁶¹ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 164; *Hopscotch* 37.

⁶² At first Cortázar wanted to entitle the novel “mandala,” but he rejected it for being too pretentious. See the letter that he sent to Amestoy on 29 October 1972, now in *Cartas 1969-1976*, vol. 4, ed. Aurora Bernárdez and Carles Álvarez Garriga (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2012) 250.

⁶³ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 164; *Hopscotch* 37.

lingüístico sino de la búsqueda de un lenguaje totalmente veraz, capaz de contener verdaderamente *toda* la realidad psicológica del hombre” [“It is not linguistic experimentalism but a search for a totally *true* language, capable of truly containing the *whole* psychological reality of men”].⁶⁴ Although De Sola links experimentalism to linguistic artifice, I will argue that Cortázar’s experimentalism includes the meaning of that search.

Similarly, Oliveira’s method is to throw everything out, including language, to finally defenestrate himself—and even the window itself—in order to experience that purification because “[n]os hace falta un *Novum Organum* de verdad, hay que abrir de par en par las ventanas y tirar todo a la calle, pero sobre todo hay que tirar también la ventana, y nosotros con ella.” [“[we] need a real *Novum Organum*, we have to open our windows up wide and throw everything out into the street, but above all we also have to throw out the window and ourselves along with it.”]⁶⁵ The novel should, then, invite the reader to collaborate in creating that *novum organum* through a narrative that instead of following a “orden cerrado dejará sistemáticamente afuera esos anuncios que pueden volvernó mensajeros” [“closed order that will systematically leave outside those announcements that can make messengers out of us”]⁶⁶ includes *us* – the readers, the real characters of the novel. On the other hand, Morelli also has an ambitious project that, reminding us of Joyce once again, reminds us of Stephen’s theories about the process of creation included in *A Portrait*. Nevertheless, humorously, both Oliveira’s search and Morelli’s project also bear some resemblance to the description of the utopian society made by Ceferino Píriz.

Píriz was a Uruguayan citizen who wanted to organise the world in races, distributing the same number of weapons throughout the countries, controlling birth rate, and so on. He wrote a dissertation of the perfect society that he then sent to a Unesco prize, entitled *La luz de la Paz del Mundo*. Cortázar, probably amazed by this reckless visionary, inserted his text in Chapter 129 of

⁶⁴ De Sola 106.

⁶⁵ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 727; *Hopscotch* 546.

⁶⁶ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 560; *Hopscotch* 397.

Hopscotch, when Oliveira's friend Traveler reads Píriz's contributions.⁶⁷ Due to the insertion of this text in the narrative *in medias res*, Cortázar worries in a letter to his friend Francisco Porrúa that the reader will not be able to discern the authorial authenticity of Píriz's book. Cortázar writes: "¿Cómo te parece que deberíamos hacer para indicar que los textos son de Ceferino, y que Ceferino existe? (Por lo menos existía en 1953 cuando mandó su obra a París y yo la barajé en el aire)." ["How do you think we should indicate that the texts are by Ceferino, and that Ceferino is real? (At least he was real in 1953 when he sent his work to Paris and I shuffled it in the air)."]⁶⁸ Cortázar mentions Píriz again in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, when he writes that Píriz helped him to write *Hopscotch*, and complains that Uruguayans have not yet discovered his writings: "Llevo cinco años esperando noticias sobre el autor de *La Luz de la Paz del Mundo*. ¿Es así, críticos orientales, como investigan las fuentes de su propia cultura?" ["I have been waiting for some news about the author of *La Luz de la Paz del Mundo* for five years. Is this how you, oriental critics, investigate the sources of your own culture?"]⁶⁹

Píriz is someone who, making use of reason, fashioned a plan designed to make the world perfect. However, this perfect world – this text put into practice – would turn reality into a nightmare, as society would have to obey a series of rigid and nonsensical, quasi-Stalinist, rules. I think that by introducing Píriz's utopic dissertation Cortázar is creating a double reflection. On the one hand, we could think that something similar to Píriz's text would happen to Morelli's project, as his precepts would end up losing their energising tangential aspect and becoming something else. Indeed, in the interview with Picon Garfield Cortázar disagrees with Morelli, stating that the character's hypotheses about the ideal novel are impracticable and that they even lack literary interest. In fact, according to the author, this is why in his next novel, *62: A Model Kit* (which he calls *62* in reference to Morelli's Chapter 62 in *Hopscotch*): "la hipótesis de Morelli está realizada parcialmente pero no totalmente. Yo no creo que sea practicable, incluso creo que

⁶⁷ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 680-686; *Hopscotch* 502-507.

⁶⁸ Carta to Francisco Porrúa from Paris, 5 January 1962. *Cartas 1937-1963*, vol. 1, ed. Aurora Bernárdez (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2000) 465-468.

⁶⁹ Cortázar, "Los piantados y los idos," *La vuelta* 142-152, 152.

no tiene interés literario.” [“Morelli’s hypothesis is partially but not fully realised. I do not think it practicable, I even think it lacks literary interest.”]⁷⁰

Eco also regards *Le Livre* as a utopian project that would have probably become uninteresting if Mallarmé had given it an end. Eco says that Mallarmé’s project “was embroidered with evermore disconcerting aspirations and ingenuities, and it is not surprising that it was never brought to completion. We do not know whether, had the work been completed, the whole project would have had any real value.”⁷¹ Píriz’s description of the perfect society and his apparently absurd writing may be far removed from Morelli’s avant-garde praxis, but a similar allusion to the mystifying and non-achievable ideal is at stake. Morelli’s novel and Píriz’s perfect society are both unrealisable narratives, leading us to wonder if the same fate awaits Oliveira’s quest. Therefore, on the other hand, we must ask whether Oliveira’s life-long search leads him to a quite hopeless resolution, or whether it might offer a more tangible reward. Juan Carlos Curutchet has written extensively on the utopian character of the novel and concluded that also Oliveira’s quest for the Reino Milenario is impossible – and sometimes even ridiculous.⁷² As the narrative comes to its end Oliveira reaches his own limit, his last square. This is the moment during which Oliveira, after crossing an important line, truly struggles to resolve his situation. He has been hopping on the hopscotch grid from Earth, the departing point, to Heaven, only to realise that both are on an equal, earthbound plane, and that if he jumps through the window – if he defenestrates himself – he will land in a very earthly heaven, chalked on the patio below, at the head of the hopscotch grid.

Suicide is one way out of this dead-end situation; and some critics have read this possible ending as definitive.⁷³ Certainly this reading would signify that utopia, authenticity, or even any sort of ethical hope is meaningless, because death beats the battle and, like Morelli’s and Píriz’s projects, life is ultimately a meaningless tragedy. Sharkey, for instance, suggests that Oliveira’s

⁷⁰ Picon Garfield, “Cortázar 85.

⁷¹ Eco, *The Open* 13.

⁷² Curutchet 87.

⁷³ Sharkey, especially Chapter 2, dedicated to *Hopscotch*.

weight of history is what carries him to commit suicide, asserting that the novel is a genuine tragedy.⁷⁴ If we believe this interpretation, however, we are left with a novel that announces the closure of the High Modernist tradition that Lezama Lima was announcing, because it has questioned itself to exhaustion and is unable to present anything new. Zombie-like, it carries itself to its own annihilation. These critics' tragic reading is, nonetheless, quite removed from Cortázar's plan and Oliveira's humorous outlook. We need to remember the idea of the open ending here, because there are at least two other possibilities regarding Oliveira's quest that should not be discounted: one is a permanent descent into madness, and the other an unwritten return to everyday life. Cortázar, holding true to Eco's understanding, never offers a definitive answer. Instead, he chooses not to know, not to resolve Oliveira's situation, so that anything can happen. In the interview with Picon Garfield he insists that he himself did not know, but that suicide is an unlikely dénouement because Oliveira is ultimately an optimistic character, regardless of his inability to lead a normal life. As Cortázar expresses it: 'I detest solemn searches ... The deepest insights sometimes emerge from a joke, a gag, or a slap in the face.'⁷⁵

Cortázar's experimentalism is integral; it is not just reduced to linguistic artifice or organisational playfulness. It includes, instead, a contemporary tension between the need for a renewal of old Western values and a profound scepticism against any big enterprise (remember that Oliveira chooses to not get involved in the social uprisings for Algerian independence, for instance). Cortázar expresses this tension in a circular and thus self-referential narrative, so Morelli's ideas refer to *Hopscotch*, Píriz's absurd project refers to Morelli's ambitions, Oliveira's search leads the reader back to the novel multiple interpretations, and they all somehow fail and not fail to carry out their purposes. *Hopscotch* is, then, a self-aware, parodic novel. As it happens, this element of parody, so integral to postmodernism is largely missing from Eco's writings and in his ideas about the open work.

⁷⁴ Sharkey 227.

⁷⁵ Luis Harss, "Julio Cortázar or the Slap in the Face," *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin-American Writers*, ed. Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 229-230.

We have seen that Cortázar piles up earlier experimental practises, he comes up with a new and nonsensical language; he recovers the idea of the new man, and offers a collage book for the author to play with. However, the compilation of experiments that is *Hopscotch*, turns the whole novel into a container of experimentalisms that Eco did not foresee, since openness does not tackle the problem of repetition and exhaustion that *Hopscotch*, as other works from this period that I will analyse in the following chapters, entailed. We cannot ignore the fact that Eco's categories always apply to reception and that the level of openness is therefore always in a difficult position. Openness is indeed a democratic concept that condenses certain important features of the 1960s experimental novel, but there are other, perhaps more meaningful elements that were at stake in that period, and which deeply transformed the meaning of the experimental. In the next chapter we will see that a re-enactment of the experimental techniques of the historical avant-gardes detached from the political ideology of the previous generation provokes Cortázar and Calvino (who had a relationship that exceeded the limits of the literary) to intensify this new understanding of experiment in the French capital during the mid-sixties.

CHAPTER 3: RE-ENACTING THE HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDES IN PARIS

1. The Paradox of the New New

Cortázar moved to Paris in 1951. From 1962 Calvino began commuting to the French capital from Rome, San Remo and Turin, spending time there with Esther Judith Singer (also known as Chichita) with whom Cortázar and his first wife, Aurora Bernárdez, worked as translators at UNESCO headquarters. In 1965 Calvino married Chichita and decided to settle down in Paris, where he would be based for the next fifteen years, during which time the two couples developed close personal and literary relationships. Cortázar and Bernárdez became godparents of Calvino's and Chichita's daughter Giovanna, who was born in Paris in 1965. Bernárdez became the translator of Calvino's works into Spanish, translating, for instance, *Le cosmicomiche* [*Las cosmicómicas*] in 1967 and *Le città invisibili* [*Las ciudades invisibles*] in 1972, as well as various other texts. Calvino assisted with the publication of Cortázar's work in Italy through the Einaudi publishing house (for which he worked as an editor from 1949 to 1984), and he even wrote an introductory note for the Italian edition of Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y de famas* (1962), published in Italy in 1971, in which he writes that the stories are “la creazione più felice e assoluta di Cortázar” [“the most felicitous and absolute creation of Cortázar”].¹ Cortázar also wrote three sonnets in Italian that he dedicated to Calvino, entitled “In Italico Modo.”² Their mutual admiration, however, in rare occasions stepped on the ground of influence.

In this chapter, we will see that their fictional work perhaps does not share much in terms of style, but they (probably unknowingly) experienced a similar reaction to the aesthetic anxieties of

¹ Calvino, Preface, *Storie di cronopios e di famas*, trans. Flaviarosa Nicoletti Rossini (Turin: Einaudi, 1997) back cover.

² Cortázar entitles the poems “Tre donne” [“Three women”]: “Simonetta,” “Carla” and “Eleonora.” These are included in *Salvo el crepúsculo* (Pamplona: Palabras Mayores, 2012) 72-75. Coincidentally, Calvino entitles his imaginary cities in *Invisible Cities* after names of women too. Cortázar provides a brief introduction to the poems that he calls “In Italico Modo,” in which he explains that the sonnets are experiments in Italian, a language familiar but vulgarised by Argentineans. He also informs us that Calvino shouted “Accidents!” when he heard him reading the poems.

the new avant-garde French scene that disclose a similar approach to the experimental. Calvino and Cortázar read the works of the *nouveau roman romanciers*, and they both decided to disassociate themselves from the ideas of the nouveau roman and favour a more subjective conception of literature. A comparative study of their reaction to this movement will therefore provide an understanding of their wider experimental practices, and we will see how their experimentalisms unfastened from the strictures of both the historical and the new avant-gardes. I will first approach the ideas of the *nouveau roman* (a term coined by Émile Henriot in 1957 that stresses the novelty of the French contemporary novel), particularly on the idea of “newness” because of its centrality to the definition of any avant-garde movement. The most representative author of the *nouveau roman*, Alain Robbe-Grillet, wrote a series of essays in order to define the poetics of this new writing, such as “À quoi servent les théories” (1955) [“The Use of Theory” (1965)], “Du réalisme à la réalité” (1955) [“From Realism to Reality” (1963)] and “Nouveau roman, homme nouveau” (1961) [“New Novel, New Man” (1965)], all gathered in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963) [*Towards a New Novel* (1965)],³ which are at the centre of my analysis.

In the 1950s and 1960s a reinvigorated ambition for the exploration of new narratives appeared among many Parisian writers. Some of these writers presented themselves as the authors of the nouveau roman, a group that wanted to resuscitate the historical avant-garde and, according to critic Niilo Kauppi, “attempted to create a new literature on the ruins of the old.”⁴ Among its members were the novelists Michel Butor, George Perec, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon and Robbe-Grillet. The last of these, as I just mentioned, undertook the task of theorising the movement, devoting a series of essays to build up the principles of the actual group. It was important for these writers, for instance, not to be thought of as an organisation of authors adhering to a manifesto in the mode of Bretonian Surrealism or Marinettian Futurism.⁵ Their

³ Calder Press published a translation by Richard Howard, which also includes texts written after 1963 until 1965.

⁴ Niilo Kauppi, *Radicalism in French Culture: A Sociology of French Theory in the 1960s* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010) 13.

⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “The Use of Theory,” *Snapshots & Towards a New Novel* (London: Calder, 1965) 45.

stylistic ideas should instead be understood as a “current,” which Renato Poggioli describes as something vague and transitory opposed to the imperishable precepts of a school.⁶ Robbe-Grillet expressly states that the term *nouveau roman* “is merely a useful epithet that can be used to include all those writers who are trying to find new forms for the novel.”⁷ Nevertheless, he modelled and determined the extent of this stylistic modernisation in his essays. Recent studies, like Galia Yanoshevsky’s “The significance of rewriting, or *Pour un nouveau roman* as the manifesto of the *Nouveau Roman*,” agree that Robbe-Grillet’s essays edited and gathered in *Towards a New Novel* shaped a manifesto of the same magnitude as that of their predecessors.⁸ The specifics of the Parisian literary scene of the late 1950s that Robbe-Grillet addresses in his anthology – or manifesto – will therefore end up shaping the literary programme of the *nouveau roman* as a whole.

In many ways, Robbe-Grillet’s principal claims are similar to those expressed by the previous European avant-gardists of the 1910s-1930s. He argues against the belief that they are just “hirsute young men with conspiratorial smiles going on putting fireworks under the seats in the Academy with the sole aim of scandalising the bourgeoisie.”⁹ For him, avant-garde means “that [the artist] is somewhat ahead of his time, and that tomorrow the common herd will be writing like he does.”¹⁰ Robbe-Grillet privileges an authorship driven by the investigation of unknown territories that adjusts better to modern times. According to him, the new narratives should be more sensitive to their surroundings and eager to express modernity because, as the human relationship to the world changes due to scientific discoveries, technological advances, social revolutions, upgraded legislation and so on, the form in which the author expresses that relationship must alter accordingly. Thus, “if we shut our eyes to our real situation in the

⁶ Poggioli 20.

⁷ Robbe-Grillet, “The Use 45.

⁸ Galia Yanoshevsky, “The significance of rewriting, or *Pour un nouveau roman* as the manifesto of the *Nouveau Roman*,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 3.3 (Winter 2003): 44.

⁹ Robbe-Grillet, “On Some Outdated Notions,” *Snapshots* 58-59.

¹⁰ Robbe-Grillet, “On Some 55-58.

present-day world,” warns Robbe-Grillet, “that situation will in the end prevent our constructing the world and the man of tomorrow.”¹¹

Regarding tradition, Robbe-Grillet writes that no author would ever be able to construct the man of tomorrow *ex vacuo*, as they are part of a determinate history, and that involves carrying a linguistic baggage in which tradition travels. However, in contrast to the High Modernist’s methods of inclusion in encyclopaedic works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Robbe-Grillet suggests that the writers of the *nouveau roman* should follow the principle of exclusion; as he explains, a true revolution must involve a constant renewal of literary form, which may force the author to leave that learnt history and its representations in the background.¹² Thus, the writers of the *nouveau roman* are aware of traditional and inherited forms but this should be accompanied by particular “solutions” for the employment of the “new.” Robbe-Grillet insists on the avoiding of, for instance, the figure of the lonely, weather-swept literary genius about whom we read repeatedly in the self-representations of the Romantics and who, according to the French writer, was still present amongst the first avant-gardes. The writers of the *nouveau roman* must reject authorial intrusion as well as the sentimental depth of their characters, and look at the world and its objects with new eyes, working towards a creation of *presence*, a narrative detached from deeper meanings and conclusive interpretations: “In the construction of future novels, gestures and objects will be *there*, before they are *something*.”¹³

These ideas recall the camera-eye technique used in the cinéma-vérité of the 1960s, since they also apply a narrative that focuses on objects and actions developed in a determinate scene rather than on the biography of the characters.¹⁴ The technique takes the omniscient narrator further from the position that he had in the Naturalist novel and leaves him with the sole function of

¹¹ Robbe-Grillet, “The Use 45.

¹² Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality,” *Snapshots* 154.

¹³ Robbe-Grillet, “A Path for the Future Novel,” *Snapshots* 54.

¹⁴ The Camera-Eye movement was initiated by the Russian documentary maker Dziga Vertov in the 1930s and developed by various directors of cinéma-vérité such as Jean Rouch and Chris Marker. For an insightful study about the relationship of this movement to the *nouveau roman* see Fereydoon Hoveyda, *The Hidden Meaning of Mass Communications* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000) 35.

describing, without any particular “subjective” interest, what he sees. The author, then, assumes the role of a camera/machine, reproducing in detail what the narrator sees from his/her objective position, whereas the narrative and its recipient take paramount importance. This camera-eye style of narrating set the foundations for Roland Barthes’s famous formulation of the death of the author in his essay “The Death of the Author” (1964) to which I will refer shortly.

Firstly, it is important to recapitulate the fact that Zola had already put forward the idea that a real experimentalist is not a genius but an extremely aware individual. In *The Experimental Novel* he argues that “we are moving more and more towards an age of fiction in which the problems of writing will be lucidly envisaged by the novelist.”¹⁵ For him, the responsibilities of the writer-experimentalist involves the following:

the name of “experimentalist” is given to him who employs the simple and complex process of investigation to vary or modify, for an end of some kind, the natural phenomena, and to make them appear under circumstances and conditions in which they are not presented by nature.¹⁶

For Zola the author is someone who “recognises no authority but that of facts,” although, at the same time, he/she manipulates nature in order to allow these facts to occur.¹⁷ Barthes’s death of the author seems to be, then, a logical successor to Zola’s ideas, where the author stops even manipulating the experiment and disappears for real. The writers of the *nouveau roman* react against the experimentalist manipulation of the Naturalists. Robbe-Grillet favours, instead, a highly specialised writer who works in the background without altering what is presented by nature. Thus the narrator does not act as an experimentalist in the sense of Zola, but more like an observer whose intention has vanished after the camera.

Even if in the early 1960s Robbe-Grillet had suggested that the form of the experiment was not relevant as long as it was “new,” he preferred to describe his poetics in terms of novelty, not experimentation thus we see that his ideas shape a specific understanding of novelty closer to the discourse of the historical avant-garde than that of the Naturalists. A pertinent question,

¹⁵ Robbe-Grillet, “The Use 46-47.

¹⁶ Zola 6.

¹⁷ Zola 44.

however, would be: how can this newness be “new” if it wants to reproduce an aesthetic revolution that had already taken place? Robbe-Grillet wants to come up with something “new” while reproducing the ideas embedded in the revolutionary aesthetics of the historical avant-gardes, and this sense of repetition entails serious contradictions. The Surrealists and the Dadaists, for example, carried out a political protest against the separation of art from social praxis in bourgeois society but, as Bürger remarks in *Theory of the Avant-garde*, the new avant-gardists wanted to turn that protest into “art;”¹⁸ they wanted to stylise that revolution.

According to Bürger, who, as I mentioned in the introduction, is one of the few theorists to historicise the European avant-gardes, the 1950 and 1960s new avant-gardists do not undertake a revolution but, on the contrary, stress the separation between art and social praxis that those earlier avant-gardists were fighting to reconcile. Bürger, when reflecting upon the outcome of these new avant-gardists, writes that “the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions.”¹⁹ This does not mean that the writers of the *nouveau roman* did not contribute original and excellent narratives, but for Bürger, who follows Theodor Adorno’s conceptualisation of aesthetics in *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970), the new avant-garde “stages for a second time the avant-gardist break with tradition”²⁰ and, for Bürger, another avant-garde after that historical moment becomes an oxymoron due to the impossibility of repeating a movement whose central value was to be ahead of the times.

However, history may prove Bürger wrong, because the term is still widely used today. In fact, it has become an ahistorical epithet employed to describe the multiple waves of authors who attribute social and revolutionary meaning to their artistic manifestations. The new break with tradition, mostly experienced in France between the 1950-1960s, could certainly fall into the paradox of the new new. But this belated revival, nonetheless, not only continued to question the position of art in society, but also the authenticity that historians like Bürger believed to be

¹⁸ Bürger 58.

¹⁹ Bürger 58.

²⁰ Bürger 61.

essential of the first avant-gardes. This new new, then, unveils a particularly problematic understanding of essentialist positions that Calvino and Cortázar quickly grasped and responded to in their own works.

2. Calvino's and Cortázar's Newness

In this section I will study Calvino's and Cortázar's idea of "newness." Analysing the importance they gave to newness and innovation through their thoughts and fictional work will help us to understand their relationship with the French new novelists. On the one hand, we will see that both Calvino and Cortázar manifest a preoccupation about the meaning of newness in their fictional practice that is different from that of the new novelists, and, on the other, I will argue that their conceptualisations of originality and newness set them apart from the principles of the new Parisian avant-garde that I addressed in the preceding section.

In the essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts" Calvino explores the ever-growing complexity of the history of signs from the storyteller to the machine. He explains that the storyteller of ancient tribes probably used a limited number of words which corresponded to their world-view, but that limitation did not mean that the possibilities to create new combinations of signs were not vast. In the 1920s Russian formalists broke down the structure of the folktale and identified the existence of a limited set of functions and characters – Vladimir Propp tracked 31 functions and 7 types of characters – common to all tales; and in the 1950s the French structuralist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, undertook an anthropological study in search for the pattern of thought beyond all these structures common to all human beings around the globe. He found that myths, despite their fantastical construction, are similar in different cultures and therefore proposed that there must be a universal law that regulates their structures. According to Calvino, Lévi-Strauss

understood that myths are “system[s] of logical operations between permutable terms,”²¹ from which he infers that these systems “can present unlimited combinations, permutations and transformations.”²² In fact, his cosmicomic tales are new arrangements of old myths that reflect upon the anthropological reasoning of Lévi-Strauss and other French structuralists and semiologists of the time, who believed that all the elements of human culture (not just myths) were interconnected through signs that constituted systems or structures. Calvino’s stories all feature Qfwfq, a polymorphous entity who changes shape and nature according to the story, acting as a sign that connects cultural and mythical structures. We will see that Qfwfq is the meta-diegetic narrator who relates his experiences by permutating into an amphibian, a dinosaur, a light-particle, a mammoth and other forms that Calvino imagined, at the same time that he is the immovable axis of the structure that holds the different stories together. In this section, I pay attention to one of the cosmicomics in which we find a pertinent reflection upon newness and authenticity, and I will go deeper into the structure of the book in the following section.

In “A Sign in Space” Qfwfq performs the role of a light particle in space. We are told that the function of this particle is to travel across the empty space of the universe for eternity. But Qfwfq, worn-out from his repetitive routine, one day ventures to leave a sign of his existence at a particular point of his familiar orbit. Qfwfq suddenly has the urge to leave that mark because he realises that a sign is the only way of proving his own existence: “...mi pareva d’avanzare alla conquista di ciò che per me solo contava, segno e regno e nome...” [“...I felt I was going to conquer the only thing that mattered to me, sign and dominion and name...”]²³ This sign would change everything for Qfwfq, for then onwards he will not only travel through space for eternity, but he will recognise himself, and that will give him dominion and name. Consequently, from then onwards his only concern is to travel, impatiently, to get to the spot where he left the sign. The problem comes when Qfwfq, having longed to see his sign again, is not quite sure whether

²¹ Calvino, “Cybernetics 5-6.

²² Calvino, “Cybernetics 6.

²³ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 40; *Cosmicomics* 34.

the sign he sees is the exact one he left. He cannot be certain that it corresponds to the one he created, and thus resolves that something else, perhaps another light particle, had the same idea and left his own sign too. The fact that Qfwfq cannot recognise his own sign, or distinguish it from others, jeopardises that dominion and name he was craving. What he does not realise is that to create a “new” sign that is exclusively his is impossible because there will always be others having the same idea, for signs are at everyone’s disposal and pre-existed his time. This limitation evidences a crisis about the originality and authenticity of signs, telling us that no matter how new and original we want to be, our semiotic manifestations are historical and have thus been used in the past. This realisation generates an unbearable anguish for Qfwfq, who despite being a light particle experiences an identifiable humane preoccupation regarding issues of identity. “A Sign in Space”, then, is another construction about the myth of originality, which paradoxically uses a “new” combinatory of signs to critique the veneration of newness. Like in the famous Borges’s story “Pierre Menard. Author of the Quixote” (1939), where Menard rewrites word by word Quixote’s novel and ends up unwrapping the pointless urge to create something new. Qfwfq’s search for his own and unique sign unveils this unnecessary urge to write original works of literature.

On the other hand, many critics have also drawn parallels between Cortázar’s and the French writers of the *nouveau roman*, especially in regard to his novel *62: A Model Kit*. Boldy, for instance, argues that *62: A Model Kit* “generates a net of episodes in a manner similar to the construction of Robbe-Grillet’s novels.”²⁴ Alazraki agrees that the novel is “un drama impersonal” [“an impersonal drama”] that recalls the stylistic precepts of the writers of the *nouveau roman*.²⁵ In “Mirrors and labyrinths; some comparisons between Cortázar and the *nouveau roman*” (1976), J. Ann Duncan states that in *62: A Model Kit* Cortázar followed the precepts of the *nouveau roman* to the extent that he became “the most reminiscent [of Latin American writers] of the *nouveau roman*

²⁴ Boldy 196.

²⁵ Alazraki, *Hacia* 235.

in techniques.”²⁶ Boldy also compares the doll that passes through the novel in *62: A Model Kit* to the soldier’s box of Robbe-Grillet’s *In the Labyrinth*.²⁷ This influence, however, needs to be unpacked, for it is not as straightforward as these critics suggest, especially in regards to Cortázar’s approach to newness and originality.

In Chapter 21 of *Hopscotch* Oliveira reflects upon a planned updating of his reading habits and quotes a series of contemporary Parisian authors including Durrell, Beauvoir, Duras, Douassot, Queneau, Sarraute and Butor. We have seen that Cortázar cannot avoid acknowledging the historical avant-gardes, principally Surrealism, but he finds his readings out-dated and wants to renew his library like Oliveira, who realises that he has to replace the Surrealist authors he is accustomed to because Paris is experiencing a transformation of its experimental scene:

Con en las manos anacrónicamente *Etes-vous fous?* de René Crevel, con en la memoria todo el surrealismo, con en la pelvis el signo de Antonin Artaud, con en las orejas las *Ionisations* de Edgar Varèse, con en los ojos Picasso ... Mi mano tantea la biblioteca, saca a Crével, saca a Roberto Arlt, saca a Jarry. Me apasiona el hoy pero siempre desde el ayer (¿me hapasiona, dije?)

René Crevel anachronistically in my hands, with the whole body of surrealism in my memory, with the mark of Antonin Artaud in my pelvis, with the *Ionisations* of Edgar Varèse in my ears, with Picasso in my eyes ... I take down Crevel, I take down Roberto Arlt, I take down Jarry. Today fascinates me, but always from the point of view of yesterday (did I say phascinate?)²⁸

From this commentary we cannot say that Oliveira shares a particular will to create something radically new. In fact, quite the opposite, the Parisian new scene makes him feel prematurely aged: “Estás Viejo, Horacio. Quinto Horacio Oliveira, estás viejo, Flaco. Estás flaco y viejo, Oliveira.” [“You’re getting old, Horacio. Quintus Horatius Oliveira, you’re getting old, Flaccus. You’re getting flaccid and old, Oliveira.”]²⁹ Oliveira is, like Cortázar, a foreign writer who is trying to keep up with the rapid development of the city, a capital of the arts containing a concomitant cultural kaleidoscope of constantly changing ideas, but who fails to truly connect with the scene of the new avant-gardists. Oliveira instead states that today fascinates him from

²⁶ J. Ann Duncan, “Mirrors and labyrinths; some comparisons between Cortázar and the *nouveau roman*,” (1976): 2, online, *Archivo Julio Cortázar*, CLRA Archivos, Internet, 25 October 2013.

²⁷ Boldy 99 and 143.

²⁸ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 229-231; *Hopscotch* 92-93.

²⁹ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 231; *Hopscotch* 93.

the point of view of “yesterday,” since he values the literary experimentation of the historical avant-gardes of the 1910s-1930s but does not identify with his contemporary authors of the *nouveau roman*. Furthermore, in an interview Cortázar claimed that the authors of the *nouveau roman* did not influence him: “el *nouveau roman* como tal no ha influido en mí porque, supongo, ni en las técnicas de Robbe-Grillet ni en las de Butor hay elementos que sean verdaderamente importantes para mí” [“the *nouveau roman* as such has not influenced me because, I suppose, neither Robbe-Grillet’s nor Butor’s techniques have truly important elements for me”].³⁰ He nevertheless read a wide variety of those French writers because in his library we find books like *Les demoiselles d’Hamilton* (1972), which includes a text by Robbe-Grillet; *Les fruits d’or* (1963) by Sarraute; *L’espace littéraire* (1955) by Maurice Blanchot; as well as works by Philippe Sollers and Claude Ollier, just to name a few titles.³¹

As a matter of fact, Cortázar begins *62: A Model Kit* by mentioning an author associated with those writers. On the first pages, where the narrator, Juan, oscillates between first and third person narrative, Cortázar includes a reflection upon his decision to have a meal at the famous French restaurant Polidor³² after buying a book from the local bookshop. Only a few pages later, he informs the reader that the author of the mysterious book is Butor, a pillar among the new novelists.³³ The acquisition is *6,810,000 litres d’eau par seconde*, a book that expands upon some observations of Chateaubriand on the Niagara Falls. The word Chateaubriand suddenly, and humorously, connects in Juan’s mind with the order made by another diner of *château saignant*. What’s more, when Juan starts reading Butor’s book the narrator becomes omniscient and

³⁰ Alazraki, *Hacia* 202.

³¹ The Biblioteca Julio Cortázar is held at the Fundación Joan March in Madrid. Aside from these texts we find the Spanish translation of Maurice Blanchot’s *El espacio literario* (1969) and *El libro que vendrá* (1969); and the French *Lautréamont et Sade* (1963) and *La part du feu* (1949), as well as *Maurice Blanchot, the thought from outside* by Michel Foucault (1987); *Le maintien de l’ordre* (1961) and *Mon double a la Malacca* (1982) by Claude Ollier, and *Francis Ponge: choix de textes, bibliographie, portraits, fac-similés* (1963) by Philippe Sollers.

³² This restaurant is where Pataphysicians used to schedule their gatherings. Noël Arnaud recounts that ‘Polidor is full of history’, and ‘as soon as the first number of its Cahiers appeared in 1950, the Collège de Pataphysique made the Polidor the special venue for its feasts, at once studious and joyous, which it called “scientific banquets.”’ It was also Joyce’s regular restaurant. Thus it was not only the birthplace of the Collège de Pataphysique, but it also hosted Joyce and the coming-together of the illustrious people of the 50s. See Andrew Huggill, *Pataphysics, A Useless Guide* (London: The MIT Press, 2012) 117.

³³ Cortázar, *62* 13; *62* 18.

extremely descriptive, recalling the accuracy and camera-eye “objectivity” of the authors of the *nouveau roman*. He writes that “si Juan no hubiera abierto distraídamente el libro de Michel Butor una fracción de tiempo antes que el cliente hubiera su pedido, los componentes de eso que le apretaba el estómago se habrían mantenido dispersos.” [“if Juan hadn’t distractedly opened the book by Michel Butor a fraction of time before the customer had given his orders, the components of the thing that tightened his stomach would have remained scattered.”]³⁴ This passage provides a *mise-en-scène* of the descriptive, *nouveau roman* style. Here Cortázar adjusts the style of his narrative to the style depicted in Juan’s reading, creating a mirroring – and typically ironic – effect. The narrator continues to comment on the reading disinterestedly: “Juan había abierto el libro para enterarse sin mayor interés de que en 1791 el autor de *Atala* y de *René* se había dignado a contemplar las cataratas del Niágara” [“for Juan to open the book and discover without great interest that in 1791 the author of *Atala* and *René* had deigned to contemplate Niagara Falls”]³⁵ – surely to emphasise a reticence towards the interests and highly descriptive style of the French novelists. Thus, while in *Hopscotch* Oliveira still displays some worries about keeping up with the times, in *62: A Model Kit* Juan addresses the new writers with scepticism, probably developing his ideas in parallel to Cortázar’s own. Oliveira wanted to exclude old favourites against his own inclination, in order to make his library more modern, whereas Juan reads the “new” authors unconvinced. What is most obvious, however, is that Cortázar conveys a critical position towards the newness of the new avant-garde that is excluded from the work of Robbe-Grillet.

Calvino and Cortázar, despite their stylistic differences, both exhibit scepticism towards the authors of the conceptual understanding of newness in the new avant-gardes. On the contrary, they develop their own style, parodying the inauthenticity of those new avant-gardists’ pretensions. In fact, where we most sense their disassociation from the *nouveau roman* is in the treatment of characters who, although mysterious, funny and sometimes polymorphic, evidence

³⁴ Cortázar, 62 13; 62 18.

³⁵ Cortázar, 62 13; 62 18.

a subjective quality that is lacking in Robbe-Grillet's novels. In the next section, then, I will expand on this subjective quality of Calvino's Cortázar's characters in contrast to the depersonalisation of Robbe-Grillet's stories, hoping that this study will reveal Calvino's and Cortázar's distinctive experimentalism.

3. Impersonal Characters

From the mid-sixties onwards Calvino includes several references to the writers of the *nouveau roman* in his critical work, especially to Robbe-Grillet's essays and novels. Not by chance, almost every time he mentions Robbe-Grillet his discussion turns to anthropomorphism (understood as a humane, almost mythical quality of his fictional characters) and the direction of his own literary experiments. At the same time, Cortázar also pays special attention to the new Parisian avant-garde, arguing in favour of the humane quality of his search, different from the stylistic-focused innovations of the authors of the *nouveau roman*. It is interesting, then, to further analyse the depiction of Calvino's and Cortázar's characters, mainly because it is where they manifest a tension between the characteristic depersonalisation of new avant-garde and their own – more anthropomorphical – experimentalism.

The stories of Calvino's *Cosmicomics* share a similar structure. According to Martin McLaughlin, they constitute a new genre, "the cosmicomic tale," which "was to prove a fertile space for literary experiment for Calvino, as he continued to use the form for the next two decades."³⁶ They all start with a paragraph in italics, which often presents a factual discovery of a physical law narrated in scientific style. In the first story, entitled "La distanza della Luna" ["The Distance of the Moon"], for instance, we find the following introduction: "*Una volta, secondo Dir George H. Darwin, la Luna era molto vicina alla Terra. Furono le maree che a poco a poco la spinsero lontano:*

³⁶ Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 80.

le maree che lei Luna provoca nelle acque terrestri e in cui la Terra perde lentamente energia.” [“*At one time, according to Sir Georges H. Darwin, the Moon was very close to the Earth. Then the tides gradually pushed her far away; the tides that the Moon herself causes on the Earth’s waters, where the Earth slowly loses energy.*”]³⁷

And, relatedly, in another cosmicomic called “Sul far del giorno” [“At Daybreak”] this explanation follows the title:

I pianeti del sistema solare, spiega G. P. Kuiper, cominciarono a solidificarsi nelle tenebre per la condensazione d’una fluida e informe nebulosa. Tutto era freddo e buio. Più tardi il Sole prese a concentrarsi fino a che si ridusse quasi alle dimensioni attuali, e in questo sforzo la temperatura salì, salì a migliaia di gradi e prese a emettere radiazioni nello spazio.

*The planets of the solar system, G. P. Kuiper explains, began to solidify in the darkness, through the condensation of a fluid, shapeless nebula. All was cold and dark. Later the Sun began to become more concentrated until it was reduced almost to its present dimensions, and in this process the temperature rose and rose, to thousands of degrees, and the Sun started emitting radiations in space.*³⁸

These premises, similar to the scientific approach of Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological studies, give a rigorous opening to the unfolding of the stories lead by Qfwfq. It is almost as if the stories that follow were to be illustrations of the scientific verity of the introduction. But “just as if” because when we start reading we quickly realise that we are transported to quite a different reality. Instead of scientific truth, Calvino unfolds a rather fantastic setting that will leave in suspension both the fictionality of the story and the veracity of the introductory paragraph. Indeed, due to this scientific language, *Cosmicomics* has frequently been approached from the genre of science fiction (Calvino’s book has been recently reviewed in the *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, for instance).³⁹

The stories are all narrated by the aforementioned unpronounceable, polymorphous and palindromic Qfwfq, which reminds of Cortázar’s cronopios in *Historias de cronopios y famas* (1962) [*Cronopios and Famas* (1969)], published before Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*. Cortázar had already depicted strange anthropomorphic characters. The cronopios are, according to Cortázar, “those

³⁷ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 9; *Cosmicomics* 3.

³⁸ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 25; *Cosmicomics* 19.

³⁹ See John Cowley’s review, “*The Complete Cosmicomics* by Italo Calvino, translated by Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks, and William Weaver, reviewed by John Crowley,” online, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Internet, 9 September 2015. Available: <http://www.nyrsf.com/2014/09/the-complete-cosmicomics-by-italo-calvino-translated-by-martin-mclaughlin-tim-parks-and-william-weav.html>

green prickly humid things.”⁴⁰ But they develop very humane emotions, like in the short narrative “A Sad Cronopio,” where a cronopio feels terribly sad because his watch is going backwards. He knows he is late, but less late than the Famas (another anthropomorphised creatures) because according to his watch it is 11:15 and on the Famas’s it is already 11:20. The cronopio then reflects that he has somewhat lost a portion of his life and feels unhappy and starts crying.⁴¹ Calvino, responsible for the publication of these micro-stories in Italy, contributed an introduction to the Italian edition in which he praises and defines the book’s anthropomorphic and indeterminate characters:

Dire che i *cronopios* sono l’intuizione, la poesia, il capovolgimento delle norme, e che i *famas* sono l’ordine, la razionalità, l’efficienza, sarebbe impoverire di molto, imprigionandole in definizioni teoriche, la ricchezza psicologica e l’autonomia morale del loro universo. *Cronopios* e *famas* possono essere definiti solo dall’insieme dei loro comportamenti ... Del resto, osservando bene, si vedrà che è una determinazione degna dei *famas* che i *cronopios* mettono nell’essere *cronopios*, e che nell’agire da *famas* i *famas* sono pervasi da una follia non meno stralunata di quella cronopiesca.

To say that the cronopios are intuition, poetry, the reversal of rules, and that the famas are the order, rationality, efficiency, would be to impoverish and imprison the psychological complexity and moral autonomy of their universe within theoretical definitions. *Cronopios and Famas* could only be defined by their behaviors ... Moreover, thinking about it, you will see that it is a determination more in tune with the *famas* the fact that *cronopios* are put as *cronopios*, and that when *famas* stop being *famas* there are pervaded by a madness no less bewildering than cronopiesque.⁴²

Calvino’s *Qfwqf*, then, bears a certain resemblance to the anthropomorphic cronopios. Even the style of Calvino’s narrative is similar to that of Cortázar’s: precise and clear, one would even say scientific, since they both avoid metaphors and lethargic introspections. There is a story in *Cronopios and Famas* where Cortázar describes very scientifically how to cry, or another in which he explains how to climb up a staircase.⁴³ But this does not mean that Calvino and Cortázar are following Robbe-Grillet’s camera-eye technique. On the contrary, I will shortly analyse through some examples how they are, in fact, depicting specific concerns that reflect on the human

⁴⁰ Cortázar, *Cronopios and Famas*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: New Directions Books, 1999) 113.

⁴¹ Cortázar, *Cronopios* 117.

⁴² Calvino, Preface back cover.

⁴³ “Instructions on How to Cry” and “Instructions on How to Climb a Staircase” in Cortázar, *Cronopios* 6 and 21.

condition. They turn their scientific writing into a parody of both the determinism of science and the dubious objectivity practised by Robbe-Grillet.

Qfwfq has the ability to take up so many shapes that he could be regarded as all-characters and none, depending on the action he is involved in; his physical appearance and psychological features are never described unless in opposition to other forms. However, this non-character with omnipotent abilities does not bear a resemblance with the impersonal character used by Robbe-Grillet. Calvino, like Robbe-Grillet, proposes a thoughtful, scientific writing over the intuitive, automatic method of the Surrealists, or the false determinism of the Naturalists. However, his aim is not to describe the outside world as through a camera-eye like Robbe-Grillet, but to create alternative or fantastical scenarios that illustrate very humane preoccupations. The anthropomorphism of Qfwfq, in fact, reminds us of fables and folk tales, in which animals acquire the power of speech in order to illustrate a message. Indeed, the author recalls that “[m]yth is the hidden part of every story,”⁴⁴ and thus “it is impossible to think about the world except in terms of human figures – or, more precisely, of human grimaces and human babblings.”⁴⁵

To a certain extent Calvino agrees with Robbe-Grillet’s anti-anthropomorphism, but he confesses that he is unable to turn down that primitive and humanist drive. In an interview on “Le due culture” (1962), for instance, he explains that what differentiates his fictions from Robbe-Grillet’s is precisely that

io questo antropomorfismo l’ho accettato e rivendicato in pieno come procedimento letterario fondamentale, e – prima che letterario – mitico, collegato a una delle prime spiegazioni del mondo dell’uomo primitivo, l’*animismo*. Non che il discorso di Robbe-Grillet non mi avesse convinto: ma è successo che poi scrivendo mi è venuto di seguire la via opposta.

I have fully accepted and claimed this anthropomorphism as a fundamental literary procedure, and – before the literary – mythical, linked to one of the firsts explanations of the world of the primitive man: *animism*. Not that Robbe-Grillet’s discourse did not convince me, but it happened that, then, writing I followed the opposed way.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Calvino, “Cybernetics 18.

⁴⁵ Calvino, “Two Interviews on Science and Literature,” *The Uses* 34.

⁴⁶ Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. I, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995) 233-234.

Calvino, therefore, “followed the opposed way” by returning to folk tales. In *t zero*’s tale “L’origine degli Uccelli” [“The Origin of Birds”], for example, Qfwfq encourages the reader to fill in the gaps of the story, at the same time suggesting in what form he wants it to be imagined – like a comic strip: “È meglio che cerchiate voi stessi d’immaginare la serie di vignette con tutte le figurine dei personaggi al loro posto, su uno sfondo efficacemente tratteggiato, ma cercando nello stesso tempo di non immaginarvi le figurine, e neppure lo sfondo.” [“It’s best for you to try on your own (drawing) to imagine the series of cartoons with all the little figures of the characters in their places, against an effectively outlined background, but you must try at the same time not to image the figures, or the background either.”]⁴⁷ In this story the reader is given a précis that should and should not be completed. The character is urging us to fill in the blanks of the narrative that follows because he wants to disappear, although his inevitable intrusion is precisely what makes Calvino take the opposed way, distancing his style from the impersonal stories of the *nouveau roman* authors.

In his essay “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” Calvino states that the author is “an anachronistic personage, the bearer of messages, the director of consciences, the giver of lectures to cultural bodies” – and he kills him in a Barthean style: “The rite we are celebrating at this moment would be absurd if we were unable to give it the sense of a funeral service.”⁴⁸ However, as we see, he is still present in *Cosmicomics*, in fact Qfwfq manifests such tension in “The Origin of Birds.” Both Calvino and Robbe-Grillet are writing from a position in which the author has “died,” but Calvino introduces this reflection on the discursive level of the narrative, communicating his own stylistic preoccupations. Calvino insists that “the author vanishes (...) to give place to a more thoughtful person, a person who will know that the author is a machine, and will know

⁴⁷ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 165; *t zero*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012) 24.

⁴⁸ Calvino, “Cybernetics 16.

how this machine works”⁴⁹ – and it is indeed this consciousness what I wish to investigate in the following section.

These preoccupations could be better explained looking at what Calvino refers to as “second or third degree” of consciousness. In the same article, “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” he links his fictional over-awareness to the French Structuralism and the writing of the members of the “Tel Quel” literary magazine.⁵⁰ Quoting an authorised member of the “Tel Quel” group whom Calvino does not unveil, he paraphrases that “writing consists no longer in narrating but in saying that one is narrating, and what one says becomes identified with the very act of saying.”⁵¹ We see a literary reflection invading the fictional narrative in “The Origin of Birds”, just as we have seen in Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* and *62: A Model Kit*, and thus there is an identification of the author with their writing that cannot be ignored.

In *Hopscotch* Chapter 34 we find another good example of this practice, as here Cortázar combines extracts from *Lo prohibido* (1885) [*The Forbidden* (2012)],⁵² a novel by the Spanish Realist writer Benito Pérez Galdós, with Oliveira’s thoughts about realism. Oliveira complains that his lover, la Maga, reads “easy” novels and, in contrast, he is interested in “difficult” works (I introduce italics to stress Oliveira’s thoughts):

algo así. Pensar que se ha pasado horas enteras devorando realicé los créditos que pude, arrendé los predios, traspasé esta sopa fría y desabrida, tantas otras lecturas increíbles, las bodegas y sus existencias, y me fui a vivir a Madrid. *Elle y France Soir*, los tristes magazines que le prestaba Mi tío (primo carnal de mi padre), don Rafael Bueno de Babs. *Y me fui a vivir a Madrid* me imagino que después Guzmán y Ataide, quiso albergarme en su casa; mas yo me de tragarse cinco o seis páginas uno acaba por engranar y ya resistí a ello por no perder mi independencia. Por fin supe no pude dejar de leer, un poco como no se puede dejar

⁴⁹ Calvino, “Cybernetics 16.

⁵⁰ Tel Quel was an avant-garde magazine launched in 1958 in Paris. The publishers were the writers Jean-Edern Hallier and Philippe Sollers, and among its collaborators there were Jean Ricardou, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Jacqueline Risset and Julia Kristeva. The magazine published the most important essays on deconstruction and post-structuralism. See Patrick French, *The tel Quel Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁵¹ Calvino does not specify the interpreter; “Cybernetics 7.

⁵² Benito Pérez Galdós, *The Forbidden*, trans. Robert S. Rudder and Gloria Chacón de Arjona (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishings, 2012).

hallar un término de conciliación, combinando mi cómoda de dormir o de mear, servidumbres o látigos o babas. *Por libertad con el hospitalario deseo de mi pariente; y alquifin supe hallar un término de conciliación*, una lengua hechando un cuarto próximo a su vivienda, me puse en la situación más propia para estar solo cuando quisiese o gozar del calor de la familia cuando lo hubiese menester. Vivía el *te voilà en plaine écholalie*. Gozar del calor de la familia,

like this. To think that she's spent hours on end reading tasteless as that of my own; I liquidated all the credits I could, rented out stuff like this and plenty of other incredible things, Elle and the properties, transferred my holdings and inventories, and France Soir, those sad magazines Babs lends her. And moved to Madrid to take up residence there. My uncle (in truth Madrid to take up residence there, I can see how after you swallow my father's first cousin), Don Rafael Bueno de Guzmán y Ataide, low four of five pages you get in the groove and can't stop reading, a little like the way you can't help sleeping or pissing, losing my independence. I was finally able to effect a compromise between my comfortable freedom and my uncle's gracious offer; and renting a flat in his building, I arranged matters so that I could be alone when I wished or I could enjoy family generation to generation, the voilà en pleine écholalie. Enjoy⁵³

Cortázar, by intermingling sentences from Galdós's novel with Oliveira's stream of consciousness, creates a mirroring effect in the reader, who is suddenly put before two different representations: one "easy," and one "difficult." Oliveira jokes that you "uno acaba por engranar y ya no puede dejar de leer, un poco como no se puede dejar de dormir o de mear" ["get in the groove and can't stop reading, a little like the way you can't stop sleeping or pissing"].⁵⁴ That easy reading is detrimental because it does not go back to reality but reproduces the same words "from generation to generation" without rethinking their historical weight. However, this passage reproduces something unlikely to happen in the Realist novel: the narrative reaches a meta-fictional level of representation, because what is really "difficult," strikingly, is the reading

⁵³ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 341; *Hopscotch* 191 (my italics).

⁵⁴ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 341; *Hopscotch* 191.

of both texts (that of Galdós and that of Cortázar) at the same time. Moreover, it also reproduces something unlikely to happen in the writing of the advocates of the *nouveau roman*, since the main character expresses his own personal opinions and reflects upon the act of writing, when we will now see that Robbe-Grillet avoids self-reflectiveness, and the stream of consciousness.

Cortázar expresses his thoughts about literary experimentation through Oliveira and Morelli, offering particular visions of a polyhedral complexity since there is always another side in his representations, or even multiple sides. Robbe-Grillet, on the contrary, prepares “examples” of his literary postulates. In his novels *La jalousie* (1957) [*Jealousy* (2008)] and *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959) [*In the Labyrinth* (1994)], for instance, we can find the dictums that he defends in his own essays. They are, thus, narratives absent of authorial intrusions. In *Jealousy* the events are related by an omniscient third person narrator and it takes an interpretative effort of the reader to realise that perhaps this “omniscient” narrator is, in fact, the “jealous” husband of the wife referred to only as A.... The husband’s descriptions of what he “sees” intermingle with what he “speculates,” creating a perplexity impossible to solve. The following is a good example of this highly descriptive and impersonal narrative seen through the eyes of A...’s husband:

The shadow of the column, though it is already very long, would have to be nearly a yard longer to reach the little round spot on the flagstones. From the latter runs a thin vertical thread which increases in size as it rises from the concrete substructure. It then climbs up the wooden surface, from lath to lath, growing gradually larger until it reaches the window sill. But its progression is not constant: the imbricated arrangement of the boards intercepts its route by a series of equidistant projections where the liquid spreads out more widely before continuing its ascent. On the sill itself, the paint has largely flaked off after the streak occurred, eliminating about three-quarters of the red trace.⁵⁵

This novel is the best example of Robbe-Grillet’s articulated reflections on writing, where he illustrates what he means by objective narrative and by eradication of depth. The results are exceptionally close to the camera-eye I was describing above. His narrative, then, does not include discursive questions on style of that type that we see in *Hopscotch* and *Cosmicomics* in manifold occasions.

⁵⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy* (London: Oneworld Classics, 2008) 3.

Following the rejection of depth, Robbe-Grillet explains that fictional characters need to therefore be multiple and polymorphic, superficial and objectivised. According to him they are nothing and (comparing them to what happens in a movie) “the moment the film is over they are again nothing.”⁵⁶ In the same manner, the objects of a scene do not need to be complete or directly relevant to the narrative: something can be described exhaustively, like the projected shadow of that column in *Jealousy*, and be, at the same time, alienated from its function in the story. Robbe-Grillet writes what characters “see,” and that is supposed to be merely surface matter. Time can be immobilised and conversations can be superimposed upon one another, as are those of the soldier and the child in his book *In the Labyrinth*, in which Robbe-Grillet sets up uncomfortable encounters between a soldier who is meant to deliver a mysterious box to someone, and a child who seems to be able to help him with the delivery but who is constantly miscommunicating with him and, as it happens, ends up being the indirect cause of his death. At the opening of section 10, for instance, we read this example of this absurd miscommunication:

“Where is your father?”

“I don’t know.” Then loudly, carefully articulating each word: “It’s not true that he deserted.”

The soldier looks up at the boy again: “Who says he did?”

In answer, the child takes a few steps with a limping gait, his legs stiff, one arm stretched alongside his body, grasping a crutch. He is now only a yard away from the door. He continues:

“But it’s not true. And he said you’re a spy. You’re not a real soldier: you’re a spy. There’s a bomb in your package.”

“Well, that’s not true either,” the soldier says.”⁵⁷

The soldier has been asking about this child’s father since the first section of the book, and the child is constantly replying with refusal. The repeated scenes therefore continuously break with conventional straightforward narrative, and unexpected time lapses break what would be the “natural” development of events. For the author things do not have “a beyond,” they are as they appear to us, to our eyes, because reality “just *is*, and that’s all there is to it.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Robbe-Grillet, “Time and Description in Contemporary Narrative,” *Snapshots* 149.

⁵⁷ Robbe-Grillet, *In the Labyrinth* (New York: Grove Press, 1994) 236-237.

⁵⁸ Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism 158.

Cortázar, on the contrary, often exhibits judgement about the stylistic and structural outcome of his writing. He normally does so through his characters, who display a subjectivity that, even though it turns out to be multiple, elastic, contradictory and sometimes ambiguous, does not resemble Robbe-Grillet's depersonalisation.⁵⁹ For example, in *62: A Model Kit* Juan reflects that “habría que preguntarse si tiene sentido el que estén ahí esperando que empieces a contar, que en todo caso alguien empiece a contar” [“you’d have to ask yourself whether there’s any sense in their being there waiting for you to start telling, in any case, for someone to start telling”]⁶⁰ since this is what is expected from a fictionalised character: to perform his role, even when he is uncertain about his purpose.⁶¹ Indeed the narrative stems from Juan during the first forty pages of the novel, but then it grows in complexity, like one of Cortázar's trademark mandalas. *62: A Model Kit* is truly a conjunction of actions, where vectors from three different cities (Paris, London and Vienna) converge to draw a complicated web of causes and effects between its characters. Boldy observes that they are all similar, Bohemian characters with creative personalities with the exception of Hélène, Juan's former lover, who is an anaesthetist, a profession that consists in something quite different and which Boldy associates with alienation and numbness. Duncan, in turn, regards their jobs as “doubly significant” because what we know of them is that they are creative personalities, in fact, “we know almost nothing about them apart from this, beyond their actions within the narrative.”⁶² The relationship of these artistic characters to an anaesthetist reveals an interesting contrast, because through their actions we are left wondering who is more alienated, the anaesthetist in socially-productive employment, or the Bohemian group with their dissociated relationship to current politics and social life.

For now, however, I want to focus on the contributions of Calac and Polanco, as I think they are paramount to understand the “impersonal drama” that Alazraki sees in *62: A Model Kit*. Calac

⁵⁹ Yovanovich 224.

⁶⁰ Cortázar, *62* 12-13; *62* 17.

⁶¹ *62* refers to the Chapter 62 of *Hopscotch* in which Morelli talks about his project of a new novel. It should not be read as a sequel but as the utopic narrative that Morelli/Cortázar theorises about.

⁶² Duncan 10.

is a writer and, like Morelli, he could sometimes be held responsible for the whole narration (although we have seen that Juan also includes self-reflective passages). Polanco, on the other hand, is probably an inventor. In fact, these two characters are never directly described and their actions are constantly mirroring one another's. Their arguments are impervious to logic and this is just an example:

- De todos los que conozco, usted es el más cronco – dice Calac.
- Y usted el más petiforro – dice Polanco –. Me llama cronco a mí, pero se ve que nunca se ha huesnado la cara en un espejo.
- Lo que usted busca es pelearme, don – dice Calac.

“Of all the people I know, you're the biggest cronk,” Calac says.
 “And you're the biggest pettifor,” Polanco says. “You call me a cronk, sir, but it's obvious that you've never boneyed your face in a mirror.”
 “What you're trying to do is start a fight with me, mister,” Calac says.⁶³

The rest of the characters participate in these reflections too. There are, for instance, the triangles of Hélène, Celia and Austin, and Juan, Marrast and Nicole each in unrequited love with another. But it is in the mirroring duality of Calac and Polanco where all these correspondences concur and become apparent, because they are at the same time mirror and parody of the exchangeable characterisation that Cortázar undertakes in *62: A Model Kit*.

Robbe-Grillet wants to end with what he calls the myth of depth and the endless symbolism of former models in order to create the “new:” the narrative of the now. Nonetheless, his deliberate experiments with scenes and characters have triggered a sense of intrigue and endless debate among critics. The critic Ben Stoltzfus, for instance, reads a Surrealist's inheritance in *Le Voyeur* (1955) [The Voyeur] and *Jealousy*. In *The Voyeur*, according to Stoltzfus, the main character, Mathias, is a sex pervert with schizoid tendencies, and in *Jealousy* the nameless husband is a deliriously jealous character. As this critic indicates:

These two men see and react only to those aspects of their environment which are meaningful in terms of their psychological distress. The fact that Robbe-Grillet does not analyse their emotions in no way negates this subjectivity of theirs. The reader, instead of the novelist, must be the analyst; the reader must identify himself with the psychic continuum of these two deranged personalities; he must see what they see and, if he does, the reader will

⁶³ Cortázar, 62 39; 62 55.

realize that the apparently incoherent jumps in time-space, that the bizarre juxtaposition of objects and events, are not arbitrary or irrelevant ... but that they follow a rigorous Freudian determinism.⁶⁴

Even if Barthes sees only surface in these novels: “Les Matériaux sont associés les uns aux autres par une sorte de hasard indifférent” [“The Materials are related to each other by a sort of indifferent chance”]⁶⁵ this surface has been unavoidably tainted by criticism and hermeneutics. It does not take much consideration of Robbe-Grillet’s works to realise that, in spite of his oft-repeated insistence on objectivity and detachment, his novels nonetheless reflect on the nature of the human being in depth and throughout. Mario Barengi agrees that Robbe-Grillet’s novels involve, in fact, a radical turn to subjectivity. To focus exclusively on the outside world is to focus exclusively on perception and language, thus ensuring that his literature is a highly accurate description of perception, like the narrative of the pre-conscious eye. Barengi writes that

gli oggetti di Robbe-Grillet sono tutt’altro che impermeabili alla significazione. Il suo apparente oggettivismo tende anzi a risolversi in un soggettivismo radicale, giacché le cose descritte, pur nella gelida impassibilità della descrizione, non si situano mai in uno spazio vuoto, neutro; c’è sempre qualcuno che le guarda o che le pensa.

the objects of Robbe-Grillet are everything but impermeable to signification. His apparent objectivity becomes radical subjectivity since the things described, even in the icy detachment of description, are never set in an empty, neutral space; there is always someone who looks at them or thinks about them.⁶⁶

Robbe-Grillet’s fictional work is subjected to his theoretical discernments about stylistic concerns. But, whereas he is coming up with a “new” and “depersonalised” style, he is still representing someone’s view, something that disrupts that pretended neutrality. Calvino and Cortázar, on the other hand, are aware of this impossible radical objectivity and invest their efforts in interrogating their own approach and developing a more conscious experimentalism.

⁶⁴ Ben Stoltzfus, “Alain Robbe-Grillet and Surrealism,” *MLN* 78.3 (May 1963): 272.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, “Littérature Littérale,” *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964) 882.

⁶⁶ Barengi, *Italo Calvino. Le linee e i margini* (Rome: Il Mulino, 2007) 52.

4. A Conscious Experimentalism

We have seen that in the mid-1960s Paris, Calvino and Cortázar concur on the direction of their literary experiments. They do not write experimentally in order to illustrate an avant-gardist position; on the contrary, they focus on the representation of subjectivity to exhibit its problematic. Calvino and Cortázar both strive against traditional representations of depth and the illusion of objective nature in the nineteenth-century novel, and, instead, present a more complex, relativistic and self-reflective project. Guido Bonsaver has already noted that in *Cosmicomics* Calvino, probably due to moving to the French capital, departs from a “grado zero” [“zero degree”] of literature, but contrary to the poetics of the writers of the *nouveau roman*, “egli non tenta di rendere un mondo oggettivizzato e disumanizzato. Al contrario, le *Cosmicomiche* traboccano di ‘umano’” [“he does not try to create an objectified and dehumanised world. In contrast, *Cosmicomics* is full of ‘human’”].⁶⁷ In this final section I will, therefore, unfold this human or conscious experimentalism through a further analysis of Calvino’s and Cortázar’s work.

In Calvino’s “The Origin of Birds,” when old U(h), the wisest of the tribe, announces the advent of a new species, he declares that they are freaks of nature; a monstrosity, mainly due to their difference and foreignness. Later on, U(h) even dares to deny their existence altogether, since the effort to assimilate a new species into their reality would take too much effort. Thus, denial and ignorance are a preferable, easier outcome. Again here, we see how the humane reaction of these characters acts as catalyst for the reader. They are entities bearing strange names such as U(h) or Qfwfq, but they manage to reflect a clearly human behaviour. I agree with Francis Cromphout’s thesis when he states that Calvino is attempting a “literature of consciousness as opposed to an objective literature”⁶⁸ – in reference to that of the *nouveau roman*. Although Qfwfq is not a definable character, Calvino communicates subjective experiences and reactions through him: “non-mostri siamo tutti noi che ci siamo e mostri invece sono tutti quelli

⁶⁷ Bonsaver, “Il Calvino” 165.

⁶⁸ Cromphout 170.

che potevano esserci e invece non ci sono” [“all of us who existed were non-monsters, while the monsters were all those who could exist and didn’t”]⁶⁹ – reflects Qfwfq. After old U(h) denies the existence of these bird-monsters, the established forms end up behaving as if they were the only ones, surely in order to secure their own identity.

Instead of an objective camera-eye reality, Calvino allows, like Cortázar, different levels of reality in his fiction. In another Cosmicomic entitled “I cristalli” [“Crystals”], for instance, Qfwfq is upset at the current state of affairs but would not consider for a moment going back to preceding stages, during which everything was made of “un eterno inverno incandescente” [“an eternal incandescent winter”].⁷⁰ In this story, Calvino is addressing the myth of origin and disengaging from the sentiment of nostalgia that normally accompanies it. The extemporal character is not fulfilled by the present state of affairs, but he is able to reflect upon the unbearable conditions of origins and communicate that he does not want to go back. He wants, instead, something different for his future: “se a sentirmi scontento delle cose come stanno, v’aspettate che ricordi con nostalgia il passato, vi sbagliate.” [“I feel discontented with things as they are, but if, for that reason, you expect me to remember the past with nostalgia, you’re mistaken.”]⁷¹ In “Crystals,” then, Qfwfq articulates his thoughts about the plurality of orders that could have become but did not, and yearns for an organised pattern that would let them play the game of “fingere un ordine nel pulviscolo” [“pretending there’s an order in the dust.”]⁷² In this story Qfwfq is an alienated individual, an outsider by contrast to his girlfriend Vug who, as well as many others, seems to praise the actual disorder of crystals. Vug loves the small and unique forms that do not obey particular rules. Despite Qfwfq’s awareness of the terrible outcomes that a particular order can involve, he seems to believe that a certain new order does not have to necessarily fall into a totalitarian trap (read here German Nazism or Italian Fascism). Like Píriz’s

⁶⁹ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 166; *t zero* 17.

⁷⁰ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 177; *t zero* 29.

⁷¹ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 177; *t zero* 29.

⁷² Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 177; *t zero* 30.

utopian society, a closed order turns into an unbearable reality; however, Qfwfq similarly distrusts a (perhaps Neoliberal?) preference for disorder:

la Terra stava andando incontro alle preferenze di Vug. Il mondo di Vug erano le fessure, le crepe dove la lava sale sciogliendo la roccia e mescolando i minerali in concrezioni imprevedibili. A vederla carezzare pareti di granito, io rimpiangevo quanto in quella roccia s'era perso dell'esattezza dei feldspati, delle miche, dei quarzi.

the Earth was moving in the direction of Vug's preferences. Vug's world was in the fissures, the cracks where lava rises, dissolving the rock and mixing the minerals in unpredictable concretions. Seeing what had been lost in that rock, the exactness of the feldspars, the micas, the quartzes.⁷³

The Capitalist world is becoming individualised. What they do not see is that the victory of individualism, such as Vug's, is their own defeat: "La vittoria dei cristalli (e di Vug) è stata la stessa cosa della loro sconfitta (e della mia)." ["The victory of the crystals (and of Vug) has been the same thing as their defeat (and mine)."]⁷⁴ In "Priscilla" Qfwfq reappears as a cell that wants to mingle with another cell in order to reproduce and have little cells. In "Lo zio acquatico" ["The Aquatic Uncle"] Qfwfq is an amphibious creature unhappy about what happens with his fiancé, a reptile that abandons him to return to aquatic life with Qfwfq's uncle (a fish), who promises her security and stability in the old waters. Qfwfq, however, decides to carry on with his life on land. He does not look back to the past because he is convinced of his own progression and future expeditions.

All these stories, due to their ethical content, speak of Calvino's experimentalism as a conscious reflection upon the human condition. Qfwfq reveals the contemporary tensions of the author, who left Italy dissatisfied with the Italian Communist party (which he left in 1957)⁷⁵ because it had justified military oppression by supporting Russia's military intervention during the Hungarian uprising. Furthermore, since we are all in some sense like that light particle, constantly travelling through space and time, struggling to leave a mark of our existence among constellations of signs, failing to recognise the singularity of our own trajectory; or we are all like

⁷³ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 182; *t zero* 36.

⁷⁴ Calvino, *Le Cosmicomiche* 184; *t zero* 38.

⁷⁵ In Chapter 5 I discuss Calvino's political career in Italy and the repercussion it had on his writing.

the reptile that does not want to go back to aquatic life and knows that the only way for him is moving forwards, the reader also participates from those reflections and engages with their openness.

These humorous and serious situations reflect a conscious anxiety that falls far from Robbe-Grillet's eradication of depth and determination to say things as "they are." In fact, Calvino relentlessly puts that "reality" into question. In various articles such as "Il mare dell'oggettività" (1960) ["The Sea of Objectivity" (1986)] and "Natura e storia nel romanzo" (1958) ["Nature and History in the Novel"] (1986), Calvino argues in favour of a literature of consciousness in opposition to Robbe-Grillet's objectivity. He criticises the "flux of objectivity" of the *nouveau roman romanciers* in which "the rationalising and discriminating individual feels caught like a fly by a carnivorous plant."⁷⁶ As Calvino states, Robbe-Grillet develops "una visione del mondo ... priva di vibrazioni religiose e di suggestioni antropomorfe e antropocentriche" ["a vision of the world ... that lacks religious vibration and anthropomorphic and anthropocentric suggestions."]⁷⁷ In *Mapping Complexity*, Kerstin Pilz also asserts that "the paradox of wanting to escape the legacy of a fossilised humanism by turning to science is inherent in Calvino's own approach to the cosmos."⁷⁸ Or, even better, Calvino reconsiders the limitations of this "fossilised humanism" by turning to a fantasy that blurs both the boundaries of fictionality in literature and of veracity in science. As Pilz explains, Calvino is escaping an old humanism at the same time that "he 'reinserts' subjectivity into the cosmos by creating with Qfwfq an amorphous yet totally human character."⁷⁹ Following the declarations in the aforementioned interview ("Le due culture"), Calvino insists that "[t]anto so già che dall'umano non scappo di sicuro, anche non mi sforzo di trasudare umanità da tutti i pori: le storie che scrivo si costruiscono all'interno d'un cervello umano, attraverso una combinazione di segni elaborate dalle culture umane che mi

⁷⁶ Philippe Daros, "Italo Calvino et le Nouveau Roman," *Italo Calvino. Atte del convegno internazionale di Firenze*, ed. G. Falaschi (Milan: Garzanti, 1988) 305-321.

⁷⁷ Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. I 130-31.

⁷⁸ Pilz 28.

⁷⁹ Pilz 28.

hanno preceduto.” [“I know for sure that I won’t escape from the human, but I do not try to exude humanity from all the pores: the stories I write are built inside a human brain, through a combination of signs developed by the human culture that preceded me.”]⁸⁰

Cortázar also comments on humanism from a similar standpoint; although, as we will fully study in Chapter 6, his views are still strongly connected to socialism and the idea of the new man. In an account of his life and work published by the magazine *Life*, he expresses:

Mi humanismo es socialista, lo que para mí significa que es el grado más alto, por universal, del humanismo ... Creo ... que el fin supremo del marxismo no puede ser otro que el de proporcionar a la raza humana los instrumentos para alcanzar la libertad y la dignidad que les son consustanciales; esto entraña una visión optimista de la historia ... Creo que el socialismo ... transformará al hombre en el hombre mismo.

My humanism is socialist, which for me is the highest degree, for it is universal, of humanism ... I believe ... that the ultimate end of marxism cannot be other than bring to the human race the instruments to achieve freedom and dignity, which are consubstantial to him; this involves an optimistic view of history ... I believe that socialism ... will turn man into his own self.⁸¹

We have seen that Oliveira represents the most obvious example of Cortázar’s pursuit of the new man. However, also in *62: A Model Kit*, there is a character that I have not yet mentioned, who represents the emergence of a new socialist humanism for Cortázar.

This is the case of the mysterious figure “my paredros” – a term introduced by Calac. My *paredro* is a noun used in Argentina to mean “to sit nearby” or “sat next to.” In Athens the *paredro* was the person who developed the role of adviser in a political institution. Both understandings seem relevant to *62: A Model Kit*. Cortázar refers to them on numerous occasions, and Juan describes their function as follows:

mi *paredro* era una rutina en la medida en que siempre había entre nosotros alguno al que llamábamos mi *paredro*, denominación introducida por Calac y que empleábamos sin el menor ánimo de burla puesto que la calidad de *paredro* aludía como es sabido a una entidad asociada, a una especie de *compadre* o sustituto o *baby sitter* de lo excepcional, y por extensión un delegar lo propio en esa momentánea dignidad ajena, sin perder en el fondo nada de lo nuestro, así como cualquier imagen de los lugares por donde anduviéramos podía ser una delegación de la ciudad, o la ciudad podía delegar algo suyo

⁸⁰ Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. I 233-34.

⁸¹ Cortázar, “Un gran escritor y su soledad: Julio Cortázar,” *Life* (7 April 1969): 46.

my paredros was a routine in the sense that among us there was always something we called my paredros, a term introduced by Calac and which we used without the slightest feeling of a joke because the quality of paredros alluded, as can be seen, to an associated entity, a kind of buddy or substitute or babysitter for the exceptional, and, by extension, a delegating of what was one's own to that momentary alien dignity without losing anything of ours underneath it all, just as any image of the places we had walked could be a delegation of the city, or the city could delegate something of its own⁸²

The paredros are thus non-existent referents. Theorist of postmodernity Brian McHale suggests that they might be what Roman Jakobson calls *shifters*: “those elements of language, especially pronouns and other deictics, which have no determinate meaning outside of a particular instance of discourse, their meaning changing (shifting) as the discourse passes from participant to participant.”⁸³ McHale indicates that they might refer to Calac's paredros, Juan's paredros and whomever's paredros depending on who is speaking at the time because the paredro “has no substance; it is merely an empty slot, filled differently each time it occurs – a long shadow cast by a pronoun.” Nevertheless, McHale does not venture an analysis that links this substance to the emergence of the new man.⁸⁴

Towards the end of the novel, when those triangular and somewhat impersonal mirroring relationships that I discussed in the preceding section, dissolve and the group of friends disintegrates, the paredro becomes more significant. On the last pages, in fact, one paredro is seen smoking a cigarette by the gates of Montparnasse station:

mi paredro se puso a fumar junto a la puerta de salida, mirando un farol que atraía muchísimo a los insectos ... apenas lo dejaban solo tendía a pensar que en el fondo nunca había otra cosa, que no había nada mejor que estarse toda una noche o toda una vida al pie de un farol mirando los insectos.

my paredros began to smoke by the exit gate, looking at a lamp that attracted a lot of insects ... (As soon as he was left alone, he tended to think that there was nothing better than spending a whole night or a whole lifetime standing by a lamp post watching the insects.)⁸⁵

Thus, when everyone else leaves the paredro stays and, after being repeatedly addressed by the characters, it finally adopts a personality. McHale exclaims that “a purely discursive entity, has

⁸² Cortázar, 62 14-15; 62 20.

⁸³ McHale 212.

⁸⁴ McHale 212.

⁸⁵ Cortázar, 62 190-191; 62 280-281.

achieved independent existence and entered the fictional world!”⁸⁶ But there is more, for what was supposed to be just a referent to the characters, what sits next to them but is not really there, becomes imperishable, while the real characters disappear, turning that exchangeability of roles between them into a ghostly presence. Recalling Morelli’s ideas for a novel *Wong*, one of the members of The Serpent Club, concludes: “La novela que nos interesa no es la que va colocando los personajes en la situación, sino la que instala la situación en los personajes. Con lo cual éstos dejan de ser personajes para volverse personas.” [“The novel that interests us is not one that places characters in a situation, but rather one that puts the situation in the characters. By means of this the latter cease to be characters and become people.”]⁸⁷ Thus, the aim of this *paredro* is, again, removed from the camera-eye idea theorised by Robbe-Grillet. Cortázar is looking, instead, for a new character that becomes human in a new and unprecedented manner.

We have seen that in the 1950s and early 1960s, new narrative strategies emerge that set aside the psychological dimension of the novel by focusing on the objects. However, in the 1960s, Cortázar and Calvino, despite their interest in detail and signs, they never place objects in the centre of their fiction. As Francesco Varanini states, “[e]n el centro está siempre el personaje-hombre” [“in the centre there is always the character-man”] – in reference to Cortázar – and continues, “[p]ero es un hombre que sabe que no puede dominar una escena que resulta demasiado compleja y contradictoria, y que sufre por su incapacidad de construir un mundo mejor. Y que intenta reelaborar esta impotencia riéndose de ella.” [“But this is a man who knows he cannot control a scenario that is too complex and contradictory, and suffers for his inability to build a better world. He, then, tries to re-elaborate that impediment with parody.”]⁸⁸ This overwhelming authorial “lack of control” discloses a critical consciousness that brings together these two authors. They are writers whose literary experiments are inevitably directed towards an active participation of the reader, but they are not tempted to follow a determinate path in order

⁸⁶ McHale 212.

⁸⁷ Cortázar, *Rayuela* 657; *Hopscotch* 478.

⁸⁸ Francesco Varanino, *Viaje literario por América Latina* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2000) 335.

to achieve it. The experiments of Calvino and Cortázar reflect on out-dated literature with playfulness, seriousness and ambiguity. The stylistic project of these two Parisian *étrangers*, therefore, involves rethinking writing strategies and experimentalisms by way of disentangling them from the programmatic and essentialist force that perhaps they never had. Moving on to the end of the decade and the beginning of the 1970s, we will see that their publications continue to entail a conscious experimentalism but a focus on playfulness and on the element of parody becomes more evident when new experimental groups flourish in the French capital.

CHAPTER 4: CHANCE ENTERS THE EXPERIMENT

1. *La fosse de Babel*: A Collaborative Project

In this chapter I will focus on chance, play and collaboration. I will address *La fosse de Babel*, the book in which Calvino and Cortázar collaborated together with André Balthazar, Joyce Mansour and Reinhoud d'Haese in 1972. It is within *La fosse de Babel* that such factors and other closely related experimental practices become apparent. I will also attempt to sketch an argument for the importance of interdisciplinary work at the beginning of the 1970s, a period during which many artists and writers chose to undertake collaborative projects, widening the limits of creativity in art and literature. This will be helpful in order to examine the relation of these experiments to the quasi-mathematical interests of the members of the Oulipo – of which Calvino became a *membre étranger* in 1973, while some sources suggest that Cortázar also received an invitation, rejecting it because the group was not political enough.¹

The precise, technical, and often comical language of Cortázar's *Cronopios and Famas* and the *ars combinatoria* of Calvino in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* extended with *The Tavern of Crossed Destinies*, will also be relevant in my analysis. At the end of this chapter I will unravel the impact that Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics and the art of the Belgian group COBRA had on these authors and the importance that chance and play had on their own writing. Cortázar turns to scientific interests in a manner that is always linked to Jarry's scepticism and play, regarding science as a reductive rationalisation of the ineffable. Calvino, on the other hand, takes the same interest further and experiments combining "elements"² of narrative to come up with new formulae in which humour and ambiguity play a pre-eminent role. He stresses that the language of mathematics and of formal logic can help the writer to not fall into a sort of language that has

¹ See Chapter 6 for an insightful analysis on Cortázar's political rejection.

² "Cybernetics 5.

been exhausted and misused.³ I will compare *Hopscotch*'s reading machine, the Rayuel-o-matic, with Calvino's proposal for a machine that would produce avant-garde work in "Cybernetics and Ghosts." The relation between chance, humour, and collaboration provided new meanings to literary experimentation that Calvino and Cortázar embraced in the Parisian literary scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Critics have completely overlooked the collaborative art-book, *La fosse de Babel*, probably due to its limited edition (only 300 copies were printed) and generic indeterminacy. The book, which is something between a book of poetry and a collection of visual art, also includes work by two other poets, the Belgian André Balthazar (1934-2014) and the British-Egyptian Joyce Mansour (1928-1986), as well as lithographs by the Belgian artist Reinhoud d'Haese (1928-2007). It was published on the 15th of January 1972 in Paris. The paper manufacturers Printemps Muguet des Papeteries Arjomari-Prioux individually numbered the 300 copies and Reinhoud signed them.⁴ The collection consists of 48 pages of lithography by Reinhoud and four sheets of stickers with coloured sentences written by the four authors.⁵ The text is printed in four colours that designate the authors. Thus Calvino's words are printed in green, Cortázar's in blue, Balthazar's in purple and Mansour's in red.⁶

The style in which the book was printed, the careful way in which these authors picked paper and press, and the fact that it is a limited edition all emphasise the importance this group gave to the materiality of *La fosse de Babel* in this collaboration.⁷ Whether they were asked to work

³ Calvino does not explicitly refer to the writer as a scientist in his laboratory, he says that there could never be any meeting between the actual scientific writing and literary writing, but he also states that "there can be a challenge, a kind of wager between them." "Two Interviews 37.

⁴ There were four main competing paper mills in France between 1954 and 1956, each producing high added value papers. The companies (Arches, Johannot, Marais and Rives) merged to create the leading French paper group known as Arjomari. The name came from the first two letters of each company. In 1968 Prioux Dufournier joined Arjomari and the group became Arjomari-Prioux. Since 2002 the company is known as Arjowiggins SAS and it is a leading manufacturer of creative and technical paper.

⁵ See Appendix II for a scan of the original art-book.

⁶ George Girard printed the text and Clot, Bramsen et Georges the lithographs. Girard was a famous Parisian typographer and Clot Bramsen & Georges is a printing house located in the centre of the Parisian borough of Marais, in the rue Vieille du Temple, where many painters such as Asger Jorn (founder of the group COBRA) worked and collaborated.

⁷ Reinhoud signed and numbered all the copies of *La fosse de Babel* in pen. I checked a copy signed by Cortázar (number 286) with a dedication to his girlfriend Ugné Karvalis: "Pour Ugné le Piuquoin Turquoise, qui m'aida

together by an editor or they compiled the book out of their own interest remains uncertain as I have not yet been able to find any document in which they discuss this aspect of the project. However, it is likely that the artist Reinhoud was behind the idea. In 1969, Calvino wrote a text for one of Reinhoud's catalogues entitled, *The world of Reinhoud*,⁸ and in the same year Cortázar published a collaboration with Reinhoud, "Diálogo de las formas" ["Dialogue of Forms"] in *Último Round* (1969) [*Last Round*], a text in which Cortázar's words enter into dialogue with the images of Reinhoud's sculptures.⁹ These various collaborations evidence a convergence among Reinhoud, Calvino and Cortázar, and an interest for the art world that anticipates the publication of *La fosse de Babel*¹⁰, which includes 48 pages of lithography by Reinhoud with his signature next to the number of each copy and this statement in the colophon:

André Balthazar, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar et Joyce Mansour, ont capté des bribes de conversation, éventées par une foule née sous la plume de Reinhoud sans, toutefois, identifier les bouches responsables. A vous de jouer. Vous trouverez des phrases volantes sur papier adhésif, découpez-les, distribuez les rôles à votre gré: le dialogue est création du désir.

André Balthazar, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar and Joyce Mansour, have caught bits of conversation, spurred by a crowd born from the pen of Reinhoud without, however, identifying the responsible mouths. It is your turn. You will find flying phrases on adhesive paper, cut them out, assign the roles at your discretion: the dialogue is creation of desire¹¹

If we paraphrase this somewhat oblique prose we would arrive at a rubric for the text of *La fosse de Babel* that ran something like the following: Balthazar, Calvino, Cortázar and Mansour have written fragments of conversation that they overheard from a crowd born from Reinhoud's pen (his lithographic characters).¹² The dialogue has somehow been disclosed to that list of authors in the shape of utterances, and they decided to transcribe them. The fact that they are fragmented

tellement à faire parler ces drôles de bru hommes" – owned by Cortázar's first wife Aurora Bernárdez. The other copy I examined in the library of Oxford was signed by Mansour (number 248), with the following dedication: "Pour Jean-François et Claude avec enthousiasme et chatteries."

⁸ The catalog is of an exhibition by Reinhoud d'Haese at Lefebvre Gallery (New York, N.Y.) and it has 8 pages with illustrations. The text was translated into English by William Weaver.

⁹ I will return to this collaboration in the next section. Cortázar, *Último round*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1969) 112-126.

¹⁰ I have only found one French critic who identifies this convergence. See Jacques Poulet's essay, "Cortázar: confluences, coïncidences et transpositions du texte bref et des formes d'expression alentour," in *Cortázar, de tous les côtés*, ed. Joaquín Manzi (Poitiers: La licorne n.60, 2002): 264.

¹¹ Colophon of *La fosse de Babel*.

¹² See Appendix II for a scan of the original art-book.

and unassigned produces a sort of openness – in Eco’s sense – at its reception, since the readers, or players (it says “A vous de jouer,” suggesting the book is a game) will be responsible for the construction or re-construction of the dialogues between the characters. This re-construction achieves a material dimension as well, because, as if it were a children’s book, the recipient is expected to place the sticker-sentences on the pages of the book, re-animating those silenced creatures. The recipient, then, is materially the real protagonist of the artistic experience, and their desire should be the true generator of a dialogue within the artwork. As their authors indicate: “le dialogue est création du désir” [“the dialogue is creation of desire”].

The technique used in *La fosse de Babel* relates to and perhaps stems from the Dadaist tradition of cut-ups. One of Tristan Tzara’s most famous literary experiments consisted of the cutting up of newspapers into pieces, and then selecting them randomly from a hat to create “original” Dadaist poems. Tzara described the instructions of how “To make a dadaist poem” in the 5th manifesto of Dada (1916-1920) as follows:

Take a newspaper.
 Take a pair of scissors.
 Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
 Cut out the article.
 Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
 Shake it gently.
 Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag. Copy conscientiously. The poem will be like you.
 And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.¹³

Chance, as the recipe suggests, is at the helm of Tzara’s experiment. The result of picking up the cut-ups from the hat will always be subjected to chance, although this kind of experiment, as I will examine further in the next section, also requires a very strict set of constraints.

On the other hand, collaboration was also on the agenda in the period of *La fosse de Babel*’s publication, with Art and Language (UK and New York), Guerrilla Girls (New York) and Group

¹³ Other experimental writers, such as William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, have also famously employed the technique. Gysin developed the cut-up technique further by cutting newspapers and juxtaposing images and text to create original pieces. He introduced the technique to Burroughs, and they collaborated in creating audio recordings using cut-ups. In 1977 they published *The Third Mind*, which is a collection of cut-up writings. For more information on these cut-ups visit http://www.in-vacua.com/tzara_text.html

Material (New York) amongst the flowering internationally recognised collaborative groups of artists. Most relevant to *La fosse de Babel*, however, is the group COBRA (which stands for Copenhagen Brussels and Amsterdam), a group of European artists characterised for their emphasis on collaborative artwork, of which Balthazar and Reinhoud were members in the 1940s. The group officially disbanded in 1951, though some of their artists continued to collaborate.¹⁴ The working method of COBRA was based on spontaneity and experiment, while they drew their inspiration from children’s drawings, primitive art forms and the work of Paul Klee and Joan Miró – an imagery that certainly influences the primitive drawings in Reinhoud’s lithography in *La fosse de Babel*.¹⁵

From the introductory micro-text of *La fosse de Babel* a particular tension shared by these authors can be detected, since despite their openness, collaborative keenness and the fact that they all want authorship to be received as a minor part of the creative process – the text emphasises that the book will only be complete once the reader sets the rules of the game in motion – they assign individual colours to their sentences discriminating with this gesture their authorship. The apparent secession of power as a precondition for the reader’s interpretative freedom is, then, somewhat debased by the fact that the colours partially carry out the tradition the authors want to supersede.

In any case, we confront from the beginning the aesthetic implications of the book: it is a collaborative and playful object that wants to open up a dialogue with the recipient. We need to bear in mind that those utterances, given the title of the work, might come from the tower of Babel or, more precisely, from its *fosse* (we should probably translate this as the “pit” or “ditch” of Babel – a kind of inversion of the famous tower). In fact, following this analogy, the coloured

¹⁴ Christian Dotremont in 1948 coined the name of the group in the Café Notre-Dame, Paris. Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille, Christian Dotremont, Asger John and Joseph Noiret formed it. They signed a manifesto entitled “La Cause Était Entendue” [“The Case Was Settled”]. These members shared an antipathy towards Surrealism and an interest in Marxism, regarding themselves as the “red Internationale of artists.” They were searching for new ways of expression and shared similar expectations for the years following World War II. For more information about the group visit

http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10954&displayall=1

¹⁵ Source of information about the group:
http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10954&displayall=1

sentences have fallen from the tower of tongues into the ditch, losing authority and completion – they are now merely snatches, crumbs of conversation. The involvement of the reader is, then, crucial so that those remains can be reshuffled into new meanings and purposes. Taking this analogy a bit further, the coloured sentences could represent the scattered remains of a unique original language – that of Babel – which has been forgotten in the pit and, under the effect of time, has lost order, wholeness and memory. The word Babel derives from the Hebrew *balal*, which means to jumble; the sentences, therefore, retain the “jumble” of Babel without that tower’s primary communicative, semiotic functions. The reader will, then, take an active role in the creation of the new meaning and the establishment of the new form. A humble conjecture regarding this reading would be that these unknown mouths represent tradition – they come from Babel, where language originates – and the fact they are so scattered tells us that tradition has been disassembled and the sense of originality has been lost. In this process the author has also been removed from their throne and has become critical of that false supremacy. What seems striking at this point is that the authors did not use more languages, because, considering that Cortázar was Argentinean and Calvino Italian, Reinhold and Balthazar Belgian and Mansour British-Egyptian, they could easily have produced a more truly Babelian project. However, the only languages printed are French and English, perhaps reflecting the fact that the book was mainly thought for a French and English readership, as well as the dominant linguistic hegemonies of the European avant-gardes.

Moving on to the visual artwork, the lithographs in *La fosse de Babel* depict strange characters with anthropomorphic forms. They recall the sort of child-like and primitive figurative manner characteristic of COBRA. If we follow the primitive emphasis of the figures, in fact, we realise that the collaboration of the recipient may involve returning the coloured phrases to their ancestors: those that “jumbled” the original meaning of the conversation in the first place. The stickers become, then, potential speech- and thought-balloons to be inserted into what might resemble an absurdist graphic novel. The colourful utterances could be used and understood as

“illustrative” of the figurative postures of Reinhoud’s creatures. Developing the analogy of the graphic novel, there are a few characteristics that distance *La fosse de Babel* from that genre, even though it has the speech-balloon quality. In a graphic novel language and visual material maintain a certain balance and events unfold in a discursive sequence. In *La fosse de Babel*, on the contrary, the collection of images lack a logical arrangement and the sentences perform a subjugating role: that of playing with the lithographs. The collaborators of *La fosse de Babel* seem to bring back Lessing’s discernments about the art of painting and writing in the *Laocoön* (1766), when he states that painting is a visual art that develops synchronically because it is experienced at once by the receptor, whereas poetry is a diachronic art because it develops in time. Certainly, the sentences of *La fosse de Babel* develop in time, but they are also visually coloured, stressing the plasticity of language, and they are supposed to be scattered on a surface, turning their reading almost into a “synchronic” experience. It can be argued, therefore, that this hybrid quality becomes a synthesis of the old dichotomy between synchronic and diachronic art, since language can stress its materiality and act synchronically (as the work of Dada, and later on, in the 1950s Concrete poetry proved) and painting diachronically (as indeed it is demonstrated by hieroglyphics and the pictorial narrative methods employed by Christianity).¹⁶

The sentences that we find on the stickers of *La fosse de Babel* could be classified in four different groups, which I think can help to understand the content of the book. There are those sentences that relate directly to pictorial representation, referring to the figurative drawings of Reinhoud. These might form a first group. When Cortázar, for instance, writes “If you find it funny that he saddled me with such a morphology,” we can make a connection with various illustrations by Reinhoud, because his figures adopt bizarre forms resembling animals and humans of distorted proportions. When Balthazar writes: “Clean your brawn, my sweet raptor!” this “raptor” reminds us of the raptor-like birds of some of Reinhoud’s drawings, and we can, again, link the comment to the pictures. Cortázar and Mansour also talk about birds: “No point

¹⁶ See Appendix I for translations of the French sentences into English.

in asking a condor instead of a dove; we have not yet discovered America,” and “We must kill the woodpecker of belly buttons in its sleep.” Reinhold frequently draws bird-like creatures as well as suns and, appropriately, Balthazar writes: “I love this bit of sunshine on your left cheek, smooth little hollow in the shadow of your smile...” and Cortázar: “Paul was right, that sun there is a truly dazzling error.” Cortázar even refers to a particular page of the book on one occasion, making Reinhold’s figures talk among themselves on a metatextual level: “Ah, if he had screwed me at page 34, what would that bitch take there!” These sentences, which most clearly refer to the depicted figurative actions, are the ones that could most easily be imagined as speech-bubbles that the reader will have to arrange in a game of “Guess Who.”

Not all the coloured sentences can clearly be said to refer to the pictures, however. A second group of utterances, all by Cortázar, are addresses to the other authors. Cortázar refers to each of them: “Balthazar, Balthazar ... Yes, but he had Melchior and Gaspar to carry the trinkets around;” “This eagle makes me think that whenever one of us tries to call Reinhold to tell him a few truths, he grabs a pen;” “Of course I asked you for a pedicure, Reinhold, but even so!” “Your Holiness, it is rumoured in Rome that Calvino does not believe in God!” and “I bet Joyce Mansour will take care of your erotic side, so I remain chaste, Margerite.” He even comments upon himself: “Being born in Belgium, Cortazar [sic] finds we are quite natural, which shows we should beg our beloved dad to send him good hot stews.”

There is a third group of sentences, which are more political and literary and less referential or pictorial and could be placed anywhere in the volume. Most of them seem to be a criticism of Western society: “It will be better for you if you dress as an European” – by Mansour, who, as an Egyptian woman, would have been sensitive to such changes in clothing. In fact Mansour also complains about the general lack of improvisation in letters, which is certainly a technique these authors have put into practice in *La fosse de Babel*: “Today who improvises? Not the virgin entangled in her virginity, not the pale murderer, tired of his crime before even knowing the author. Only the priest and the surgeon...” Cortázar also introduces ironic criticism: “Certainly

the revolution is desirable, dear friend, but still, it should not affect the values that have made us what we are;” and “For people like us, Sir, any course of action and any point of view require from the beginning good action of courses and fair views of points;” and “Here is a small donation; the VAT is, of course, at your expense.” When Calvino mentions the Furies: “Gradually, as the Furies pursued me, their laughter makes me bewildered,” and later on mentions Orestes: “The rest is Orestes,” we realise he is referring to Euripides’ play on both occasions, and also to Aeschylus’ prologue to *Agamemnon* as well as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “The rest is silence.”

We can even form a fourth group of sentences that seem truly unconnected and improvised. These sentences do not have any apparent link to any other sentences, and include Balthazar’s “I tell you, the Marquise will remain prisoner of the sweat under her arms,” and Calvino’s “Put a paper tiger in your case! You take one step forward, two steps back.” It is important to note that through this semantic categorisation I am not trying to establish a logical procedure behind the collaboration, for, in fact, most of the sentences are fundamentally ambiguous and could be placed under two or more categories. Nevertheless, such taxonomy is useful to form an idea of the functionality of the sentences in the book, before taking the step of analysing their combinatorial potentiality.

2. Playing at Combinatorial Games

La fosse de Babel, as the collaborative project I was describing above, consists of a *game* in which the reader takes paramount importance. It is a combinatory game: the reader can place the stickers or utterances wherever he/she pleases and come up with different results. In *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (2006), David Gascoigne differentiates the English terms “play” and “game” in a manner that may be helpful to attempt an understanding

of the processes of *La fosse de Babel*. Gascoigne states that “play” refers to the “non-utilitarian activity primarily informed by a spirit of imagination and invention and placed outside the realm of reality-oriented problem-solving.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, the term “game” defines “the moment in which play activity becomes ordered by a set of explicit rules or conventions taken to govern the behaviour of the activity designated.”¹⁸ Considering that in *La fosse de Babel* we have to follow certain formal rules (cutting, reordering and pasting the sentences), it would seem that we are before a game, a rather child-like game if we think of the colourful sentences and the images of the lithographs.

Before disclosing the intricacies of that game, it is worth returning to Cortázar’s previous collaboration with Reinhoud. The Argentinian wrote an essay about Reinhoud’s sculptures entitled “Dialogue of Forms,” and a commentary on 37 pictures of the Belgian artist’s sculptures in his collage project *Último round*.¹⁹ Cortázar, in *Territorios* (1978), recalls the exercise of their collaboration as a “game.” The following comment insists on the ludic element of the work:

Herederas libres de una tradición flamenca que sobrevive a todos los avatares del arte, las esculturas de este artista belga provocan un regocijo mezclado con temor, un recelo frente a formas que solo aceptan jugar con nosotros para someternos a su clima más profundo, donde habitan demonios innominados. Mi *juego*, que llena algunas páginas de *Último round*, es una forma de defensa frente a esa invasión que socava los reductos de las cosas usuales.

Free heirs of a Flemish tradition that survives all the vicissitudes of art, the sculptures of this Belgian artist provoke a joy mixed with fear, a mistrust of forms that only agree to play with us to submit us to their deepest climate, where unnamed demons dwell. My *game*, which fills some of the pages of *Último round*, is a form of defence against this invasion that undermines the bastion of usual things).²⁰

Likewise, the comments that Cortázar makes in *Último round* regarding the pictures could be related to the first group of sentences from *La fosse de Babel*, those that refer directly to pictorial representation, as they all comment on the postures adopted by Reinhoud’s sculptures. In the first picture, for instance, a figure is leaning forwards and raising a finger, and Cortázar

¹⁷ David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006) 22.

¹⁸ Gascoigne 23.

¹⁹ Cortázar, *Último* 112-126.

²⁰ Cortázar, *Territorios* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1978) 116 (my emphasis).

comments: “No crean una sola palabra de lo que dicen” [“Don’t believe a word of what they say”].²¹ Again, we could easily imagine these sentences as speech-bubbles coming out from the mouths of the sculptures. The same leaning sculpture appears at the end of the series reminding us that “No crean una sola palabra de lo que han dicho” [“Do not believe a word of what they have said”].²²

Similarly, *La fosse de Babel* invites the reader to experiment with the textual material in order to create new combinations and meanings, since the experiment will not be finished until they place the stickers on the lithographed pages. However, though the meanings may be new and unprecedented, once the phrases are stuck onto the page they will probably not be changed. In fact, a tension arises out of this. Despite the apparent potentiality of meaning that the book promises, once the reader places those stickers among the drawings, there will be just one possible dialogue – the one he or she has chosen – because the game can be played only once – unless we want to rip off the adhesives and damage the book (in this sense Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961) [*A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*], which is endlessly re-arrangeable, presents a more complete manifestation of ludic potential). Furthermore, considering the book’s rarity, it would seem likely that few readers have actually played its game, choosing instead to allow the stickers to remain on their backing in a state of dormant potentiality. *La fosse de Babel*, then, cannot be considered a completely random creation abandoned to chance; not *anything* can happen here; the book is a distinctly limited compilation of sentences that can generate a limited amount of possible dialogues.

Regarding these limitations, Gascoigne stresses that any game “represents an agreed compromise between the free spirit of play and the discipline of order and constraint.”²³ As in Tzara’s newspaper poems, this oscillating attitude between chaos and order – or freedom and constraint – is emphasising the quality of openness that we have studied as Eco understood it.

²¹ Cortázar, *Último round*, vol. 2 114.

²² Cortázar, *Último round*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1969) 126.

²³ Gascoigne 24.

The Parisian experimental group Oulipo, in fact, takes this mechanism to its logical conclusion. As I mentioned above, Calvino became a foreign member of the group in 1972 (the same year of the publication of *La fosse de Babel*),²⁴ and Hervé Le Tellier, member of Oulipo since 1992, states that Cortázar was also asked to become a member more or less at the same time as Calvino, but he rejected the invitation due to the group's lack of political involvement:

Eran los años setenta. No le parecía conveniente pertenecer a un grupo que no fuera político. Es verdad, el OuLiPo es un grupo apolítico. Sólo hubo una ocasión en que nos declaramos en contra del Front National. De eso hace cuatro o cinco años. Pero por lo demás, no cabe duda de que en el OuLiPo hay gente de derecha. También socialistas, más bien de extrema izquierda, de hecho ... Para mí Cortázar debió formar parte del grupo, algunos libros como *62 modelo para armar ...* o *Rayuela* son totalmente oulipianos. Claro, su obra hubiera sido algo distinta, existía mucho antes del OuLiPo ; pero muchas obras de los oulipianos se escribieron antes del OuLiPo ... Calvino se volvió miembro en 1972, cuando ya había escrito mucho.

It was in the 1970s. He did not think it was proper to join a group that was not political. It is true, Oulipo is an apolitical group. Just in one occasion we declared ourselves against the Front National. This happened four or five years ago. On the other hand, there is no doubt about the existence of right wing sympathisers in Oulipo. But there are also socialists, far left members in fact ... From my point of view Cortázar should have joined the group, some books like *62 Model Kit ...* or *Hopscotch* are totally Oulipians. Of course, his work would have been approached differently because it existed before Oulipo; but many Oulipian works were written before the Oulipo ... Calvino became a member in 1972, when he had already written extensively.²⁵

The veracity of Le Tellier's information is contested by Carles Álvarez Garriga in his doctoral thesis, where he introduces a quotation that attributes Cortázar's refusal to become a member of the Oulipo to his relationship with the Lithuanian writer, critic and diplomat Ugnė Karvelis.

Álvarez writes: "Alguien muy bien informado (cuyo nombre mantendré en secreto) me dice que Cortázar no entró en el Oulipo porque en aquella época era compañero de Ugnė Karvelis."

[“Someone very well informed (whose name I will keep secret) tells me that Cortázar did not

²⁴ The Oulipo was founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais on 24 November 1960, the date of their first official meeting. Queneau was a writer and mathematician and former member of the Surrealist group. At the beginning, there were ten founding members from various disciplines: mathematicians, writers, academics, and so on. For more information about the group see Warren Motte, *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998) 1.

²⁵ Letellier writes that Cortázar was invited to become a member of Oulipo and rejected the invitation because the group was apolitical. Guadalupe Nettel, "Entrevista con Hervé Letellier," trans. Sophie Gewinner, online, *Mexique Culture*, Internet, 24 November 2014. Available: <http://mexiqueculture.pagesperso-orange.fr/nouvelles6-letellier.htm>

join the Oulipo because at that time he was with Ugné Karvelis.”²⁶ And he adds the following unquoted commentary that links Calvino to the source: “Los del Oulipo – y esto lo sé por Calvino – no podían ni verla. ¡Queneau la llamaba *Notre-Dame du KGB!* Ella era una fanática inquebrantable y la literatura del Oulipo le parecía un lujo estúpido, una ‘aberración del capitalismo.’ Así que prefirieron mantenerse a distancia.” [“The members of the Oulipo – and this I know by Calvino – could not see her. ¡Queneau used to call her *Notre-Dame du KGB!* She was a steadfast fanatical and considered Oulipo’s literature a foolish luxury, an ‘aberration of capitalism.’ So they preferred to keep their distance.”]²⁷

In Chapter 6 I will expand on Cortázar’s rejection, when I discuss his political engagement with the Cuban Revolution. But for now, the potentiality of meaning that arises from *La fosse de Babel* leads us again to Calvino’s essay “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” written a few years earlier out of his interest in *ars combinatoria*.²⁸ In this article Calvino explains that the world is progressively looked upon as “*discrete* rather than *continuous*.” This means that the world is not understood as a series of things that happen in a diachronic manner, but as a “series of discontinuous states, of combinations of impulses acting on a finite (though enormous) number of sensory and motor organs.”²⁹ Literature, then, like the world, has a limited (though enormous) number of manifestations. For Calvino “writing is purely and simply a process of combination among given elements.”³⁰ In the case of *La fosse de Babel*, given that there are about seventy sentences or “elements” that may be exponentially combined, various readers can come up with millions of possible meanings and combinations.

This potentiality finds a parallel in the quoted Oulipian book *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* written by Queneau, which is made up of only ten sonnets, the lines of which are presented on

²⁶ Cortázar’s invitation is mentioned again in an Internet article by Eduardo Berti: “And Julio Cortázar, the only non-Frenchman to in receive an invitation to join the Oulipo. Cortázar accepted the invitation to the meeting, but did not turn up.” (my translation) Berti, “Todos los juegos, el juego,” online, *Página 12*, 19 August 2007, Internet, 9 September 2015. Available: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-2672-2007-08-19.html>

²⁷ The commentary probably comes from Bernárdez, since Carles Álvarez is the editor of Cortázar’s unpublished work hand-in-hand with the author’s widow.

²⁸ Calvino mentions *ars combinatoria* in reference to the studies of the Catalan monk Ramon Llull. “Cybernetics 9.

²⁹ Calvino, “Cybernetics 8.

³⁰ Calvino, “Cybernetics 17.

separate strips. The reader is supposed to cut out these strips – there are 140 strips in total – and combine the verses in order to make new sonnets. This combinatorial game gives a mathematical sum of 10^{14} possible sonnets and Queneau calculated that someone reading the book 24 hours a day would need 190,258,751 years to complete all possible combinations.³¹ According to Queneau, potential literature is that sort of literature that is constantly looking for new forms, “new structures that can be used by the writers at their will.”³² Queneau, therefore, had previously come up with a project that also sets in motion the sort of potentiality that we find in *La fosse de Babel*. However, considering that the strips are not stickers, in Queneau’s case the game can be actually played through to the completion of its many possibilities. In *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* the potentiality stems from a temporal constraint, as in the novel *The Unfortunates* (1969), by B. S. Johnson, another example of this sort of experiment with constraint. *The Unfortunates* is made of non-sequential chapters presented in a box, which can be read in numerous combinations. In *La fosse de Babel*, however, it is not time but the limited materiality of the stickers that acts as a constraint.

According to Calvino, for the creative writer of the “cybernetic age” printed words are a closed field of which a very extensive but necessarily limited set of combinations are possible. Since Gutenberg’s movable type, the approach to literary composition changed. Writing ceased to be a realm of infinite possibilities and became a combinatorial “game,” in which a finite number of components – words, sentences, stories, letters and books – were selected, shuffled and endlessly re-arranged. Calvino’s interest in combination and the multiplicity of narrative possibilities is especially reflected in texts such as “The Count of Monte Cristo” (1967) and, particularly, in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. This medieval-Boccaccian tale book involves various travellers that meet in a castle, each of them willing to tell the story of their own adventures but, to their amusement, they realise that they have been mysteriously deprived of speech and can only communicate visually through a set of tarot cards. The author manipulates the deck in order

³¹ Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, eds. *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 1998) 14.

³² Motte 17.

to unveil the layout of the tale of his fictional characters, introducing the element of chance in the fate of the narrative. A second part, *The Tavern of Crossed Destinies*, employs the same constraint but using the Tarot of Marseille, shuffling it with various archetypal narratives from world literature, tales from Shakespeare, from Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso* (1516), and other sources are combined to form an intertextual puzzle. In "Le Château des destins croisés" (1981), an essay that he wrote on these stories, Calvino states that he

shared with the Oulipo several ideas and predilections: the importance of constraints in literary works, the meticulous application of very strict rules of the game, the use of combinatory procedures, the creation of new works using pre-existing materials. The Oulipo would only allow operations conducted with rigor, convinced that poetic value can arise from extremely constraining structures.³³

These constraints illustrate what Barth calls the "literature of exhaustion." We have studied that Barth understands these experiments historically, as something that happened in the 1960s and 1970s. We have seen that he relates the sense of exhaustion to the impossibility of inventing anything new. Contrary to the avant-garde discourse of the writers of the *nouveau roman*, the Oulipian writers disrupt the hierarchy of ontological norms to the extent that "the story turns its disadvantageous situation at the tail-end of a long literary tradition, when 'original' stories apparently can no longer be written, into a positive advantage, thereby contributing something genuinely 'new and lively' after all."³⁴ Chance, game and the combinatory are, then, central to understand this new experimentalism that Calvino, as well as Cortázar (although less evidently), developed in the 1960s and continued to play in the early 1970s. We are left, however, with the question of how lively this experimentalism with constraints could be when it is usually compared to a machine, which is the subject of the next section.

³³ Calvino, "Le Château des destins croisés," (1957) *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) 384.

³⁴ McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 27.

3. What Machines Do

There are many studies of Cortázar's Surrealist influence, and he himself declared in 1948 that Surrealism was "la más alta empresa del hombre contemporáneo como previsión y tentativa de un humanismo integrado" ["the highest enterprise of contemporary man as prevision and enticement of an integrated humanism"].³⁵ Cortázar's almanac books, such as *Último round* and *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, without being orthodoxly Surrealist, employ Surrealist techniques including collage and other elements discussed in the preceding chapters, as well as a Bretonian influence that cannot be denied (this is seen most clearly in the relationship between Oliveira (Breton) and La Maga (Nadja) in *Hopscotch*).³⁶ In 1963, however, Cortázar claimed in an interview with Picon Garfield that he should not be considered a Surrealist: "En mi biblioteca encontrará los libros de Crevel, de Jacques Vaché, de Arthur Cravan (¡pero no me fiche por eso como surrealista!)" ["In my library you'll find books by Crevel, Jacques Vaché, Arthur Cravan (but don't tag me a surrealist for it!)"]³⁷ Cortázar admits an influence and admires the movement, but he never becomes too attached to their predicaments. We have seen a similar tendency in regards to Cortázar's relationship with the Oulipo. Varanini asserts that though Cortázar shared the same Paris as Calvino and the Oulipo, this group "enfocaba sus desafíos hacia *contraintes* cada vez más complejas ... Los juegos de Cortázar son menos fríos y cerebrales. Menos exactos. Más próximos a la fantasía y al juego infantil." ["focused its challenges on increasingly complex *contraintes* ... Cortázar's games are less cold and cerebral. Less accurate. Closer to fantasy and children's play."] ³⁸ As I will disclose in this section, Cortázar's experiments are, indeed, closer to COBRA's art or Pataphysical playful experimentation.

³⁵ Alazraki, *Hacia* 179. There are several studies on Cortázar and Surrealism, see, for instance, Picon Garfield *¿Es Julio Cortázar un surrealista?* (Biblioteca Románica Hispánica: Madrid, 1975); Sara Castro-Klarén, "Cortázar, Surrealism, and 'Pataphysics,'" *Comparative Literature* 27.3 (1975): 218-236; Juan Carlos Ubilluz, "Julio Cortázar's Ambivalent Surrealist Search," *Sacred Erotism: Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski in the Latin American Novel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2006): 81-138; and Gavin Parkinson, "A Note Concerning Causality. Julio Cortázar and Surrealism," *Surrealism in Latin America: vivísimo muerto* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012) 161-176.

³⁶ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

³⁷ Picon Garfield, *¿Es Julio* 11.

³⁸ Varanino 318.

I found that Cortázar is still considered a honorary member of the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* after receiving the title of “Commandeur Requis de l’Ordre de la Grande Gidouille” on 1st tatane 101 (which is the Pataphysical date for, conventionally, 14th of July 1975). This nomination was published in issue 24 of *Subsidia Pataphysica* together with a translation into French of a text that Cortázar included in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, called “De otra máquina célibe” [“About another celibate machine”] about the Rayuel-o-matic, an invention by the Argentine Pataphysician Juan Esteban Fassio. Fassio, founder of the IAEPBA (Instituto de Altos Estudios Patafísicos de Buenos Aires), published a description of this device, a machine that is expected to assist in the reading of *Hopscotch* [Rayuela] in its multiple orders.³⁹ Fassio first published the invention at the Institute in Buenos Aires, under the auspices of the “Cátedra de Trabajos Prácticos Rousselianos, Comisión de Rayuela, Subcomisiones Electrónica y de Relaciones Patabrownianas.”⁴⁰ Karvelis explains the connection:

Un solo exégeta de su obra halló gracia a los ojos de Julio: un cronopio argentino anónimo [en absoluto anónimo: *Juan Esteban Fassio*] que inventó una máquina para leer *Rayuela* de pie, sentado o, de preferencia, acostado. Como el autor nunca consiguió comprender el funcionamiento, la reprodujo en *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*.

Gracias a ello, Cortázar llegó a ser miembro de honor del Colegio de Patafísica, cuya sede social se encuentra en París. Esta distinción honorífica – la primera y una de las raras que le fue dado recibir en setenta años de vida – lo infló de un justo orgullo: se encontraba allí con sus iguales.

Cortázar celebrated only one interpreter of his work: an anonymous Argentine cronopio [Fassio] who invented a machine to read *Hopscotch* whether standing, sitting or preferably lying. As the author never managed to completely understand its functioning, he reproduced it whole in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*.

As a result, Cortázar became honorary member of the College of 'Pataphysics, the head office of which is located in Paris. This honorary distinction – the first and one of the few that he was to receive in his seventy years of life – was a matter of some pride: he was represented among his peers there.⁴¹

Furthermore, I have already mentioned that Cortázar sets the opening of *62: A Model Kit* in the restaurant Polidor, in which the Pataphysicians once used to gather. In an interview with Luis

³⁹ They have even set up a website to read *Hopscotch* with hyperlinks after the Rayuel-o-matic. See Proyecto Rayuel-o-matic Digital Universal, online, *Oocities*, Internet, 20 January 2015. Available: http://www.oocities.org/espanol/rayuel_o_matic/index.html

⁴⁰ Cortázar, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, vol. 1, 24th ed. (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2006) 131-135.

⁴¹ Ugné Karvelis, “Julio Cortázar: Cara de sombra y cara de sol,” *Casa de las Américas* 25.145-146 (1984) 175.

Harss, Cortázar admits that “[u]na buena página de Jarry me incita mucho más que las obras completas de La Bruyère.” [“A good page by Jarry excites me much more than the complete works of La Bruyère.”]⁴² Alfred McAdam studies Cortázar’s admiration of the work of Alfred Jarry (founder of ’Pataphysics) in *El individuo y el otro. Crítica a los cuentos de Cortázar* (1971). Álvarez Garriga lists the numerous works by Jarry in Cortázar’s library,⁴³ and Sara Castro-Klarén discusses both the influence of Surrealism and ’Pataphysics in Cortázar’s work in “Cortázar, Surrealism, and ’Pataphysics” (1975).

All things considered, there are enough links to prove the influence of ’Pataphysics in Cortázar’s work, but no attention has been paid to the relationship between the Rayuel-o-matic and Calvino’s nameless machine proposed in “Cybernetics and Ghosts.” Calvino, like Cortázar, had an interest in ’Pataphysics that, due to his obvious collaboration with the Oulipo, has passed unnoticed. When he talks about the contradictoriness of the world we dwell in, for instance, Calvino mentions Jarry:

A thing can be said in more than one way. There is one way in which whoever is saying it wants to say precisely that thing and no other, and another way in which he also wants to say that, certainly, but at the same time wants to point out that the world is far more complicated and vast and contradictory. Ariosto’s irony, Shakespeare’s comedy, Cervantes’s picaresque, Stern’s humour, or the fantasy of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Jarry, or Queneau, are all precious to me insofar as they help one attain that kind of detachment from the particular, that sense of the vastness of the whole.⁴⁴

Linda Klieger Stillman observes: “Jarry’s influence on Calvino’s evolving artistic formation is due primarily to Jarry’s demonstration that reality resides not only in observable, physical laws, but in exceptions to these laws.”⁴⁵ *Cosmicomics*, as we have seen, is proof of Calvino’s interest in the exception, in which a scientific approach is forced to evidence its limitations.

For Calvino, even creativity turns into an exploration of the exception. This is why he emphasises the mechanistic quality of language, because thanks to its combinatorial, and re-

⁴² Harss, *Los nuestros* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1968) 297.

⁴³ Carles Álvarez Garriga, *Julio Cortázar, prologuista*, diss. Universitat de Barcelona, 1998 (Universitat de Barcelona: Barcelona, 2004). See, specially, section 1.6. “¿Cortázar Patafísico?, ¿Cortázar Oulipiano?” for more information on Cortázar, the Oulipo and ’Pataphysics.

⁴⁴ Calvino, “Definitions of Territories: Comedy,” *The Uses* 63.

⁴⁵ Beno Weiss, *Understanding Calvino* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 89-90.

combinatorial, nature we can come up with unimagined and limitless new representations. He goes even further, imagining whether it would be possible to create “a machine capable of replacing the poet and the author?”⁴⁶ Calvino does not talk about a simple machine for arranging pre-selected materials, arguing that the historical Italian avant-garde had already come up with such an instrument in their mission to deconstruct form and protest against mainstream discourses. Instead, he proposes a machine that “itself feels the need to produce disorder, as a reaction against its preceding production of order: a machine that will produce avant-garde work to free its circuits when they are choked by too long a production of classicism.”⁴⁷ This machine would create original outcomes and new literary work or, in other words, “the literature that corresponds perfectly to a theoretical hypothesis: it will, at last, be *the literature*.”⁴⁸ Thus, we would not need to rely on inspiration to come up with a masterpiece. Inspiration, according to Calvino, is something obscure and esoteric that does not really match his experience:

What Romantic terminology called genius or talent of inspiration or intuition is nothing other than finding the right road empirically, following one’s nose, taking short cuts, whereas the machine would follow a systemic and conscientious route being extremely rapid and multiple at the same time.⁴⁹

Calvino’s machine, then, mitigates the Surrealist notion of inspiration and chance. For the Surrealists inspiration was strictly related to the individual – in particular, to their subconscious – and chance. It was a state of mind in which the poet allowed himself or herself to be guided by the voice(s) that emerged from that unexplored place called subconscious, which would reveal correspondences that reason cannot see due to the limits of education and society. According to Breton, inspiration was a road to liberation because it freed imagination from the chains of reason. Breton refers to inspiration as the *spoken thought*⁵⁰ and describes it as follows:

it is what has provided for the supreme needs of expression in every time and clime ... We can easily recognise it by that total possession of the mind which, at rare intervals, prevents

⁴⁶ Calvino, “Cybernetics 10.

⁴⁷ Calvino, “Cybernetics 10-11.

⁴⁸ Calvino, “Cybernetics 11.

⁴⁹ Calvino, “Cybernetics 13.

⁵⁰ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972) 23.

our being, for every problem posed, the plaything of one rational solution rather than some other equally rational solution, by that sort of short circuit it creates between a given idea and a respondent idea (written, for example).⁵¹

Calvino and the Oulipians, on the contrary, do not rely on inspiration because only a *contrainte* guarantees the potentiality of the work. This constraint was, according to the Oulipian Jacques Roubaud, a way of asserting “a theoretical anti-Surrealism;”⁵² a way of positioning Oulipo against the members of the previous generation. For the Oulipians, then, inspiration is not the essence of the work of art. Their method is more ostensibly scientific; they conceive of their activity as a workshop, an experimental laboratory, more in tune with the experimental and scientific side of ‘Pataphysics – of which group they were, in fact, officially a subsidiary branch⁵³ – and they use constraints in order to potentiate creativity. A constraint employs the use of reason, and it is reason that allows meaning to be passed on to the reader. Thus, the creator and the reader are not passive entities serving fated inspiration, but active participants in the experiment. The constraints that seem to limit their freedom are precisely what sets them free. Queneau, for instance, wrote that the playwright of classical tragedy following stated rules is freer than the poet who writes “ce qui lui passé par la tête” [“whatever passes through his head”], and adds that such a poet is “l’esclave d’autres règles qu’il ignore” [“the slave of other rules of which he remains ignorant”].⁵⁴ Queneau also writes that “the poet who waits for inspiration is like a meteorologist who waits for storms; he does not perform experimental work, he is an empiricist gathering data.”⁵⁵

The Rayuel-o-matic is a machine that assists an active reading of *Hopscotch* in its multiple combinations, producing new combinations until all the work’s possibilities have been exhausted. Calvino’s machine, on the other hand, is an independent creator, a rather human one,

⁵¹ Breton, *Manifestoes* 161.

⁵² Mathews 40.

⁵³ The group began as a subcommittee of the *Collège de 'pataphysique* under the title “Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale,” although they promptly adopted the title Oulipo at their second meeting. Motte 1.

⁵⁴ Peter Consenstein, *Faux Titre. Literary Memory, Consciousness, and the Group Oulipo* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002) 97.

⁵⁵ Consenstein 125.

which would rebel against its own classicism and produce avant-garde work. In fact, the other side of “cybernetics” are indeed the “ghosts” that operate in the unconscious, which he defines as “the ocean of the unsayable, of what has been expelled from the land of language, removed as a result of ancient prohibitions.”⁵⁶ The storyteller works by going around signs that have become taboo, “inventing new compositions” like a machine, but in the course of combining these elements he will “suddenly get another flash of enlightenment from the unconscious and the forbidden.”⁵⁷ This would seem something that only a human mind can do and, thus, Calvino concludes that “[t]he power of modern literature lies in its willingness to give a voice to what has remained unexpressed in the social or individual unconscious,”⁵⁸ the ghosts that haunt our reasonable systems. Andrew Hugill stresses that Calvino’s and Cortázar’s machines are indeed ‘Pataphysical: “An inutilious machine that uses chance combinations to reveal fascinating insights of an ideal nature is by now such a familiar pataphysical trope to the reader as to need no further comment.”⁵⁹ These are machines which test the possibilities of the imaginary and integrate chance and constraints into their functioning in a manner which is related both to the experimentalisms of the Collège and the Oulipo. They are also, however, insufficient devices and fail to unveil the hidden taboos of our unconscious. For that, it will prove necessary to investigate the human consciousness behind these experiments.

4. Conscious Experimentalisms

Oulipians applied certain techniques, such as the lipogram, which means “leaving out a letter,” and it is based on writing avoiding a letter. George Perec, also member of the Oulipo, undertook the most famous lipogrammatic exercise in his book *La Disparition* (1969) [*A Void* (1995)], a

⁵⁶ Calvino, “Cybernetics 19.

⁵⁷ Calvino, “Cybernetics 23.

⁵⁸ Calvino, “Cybernetics 19.

⁵⁹ Hugill 171.

novel of 300 pages written without the letter “e.” In *Exercices de style* (1947) [*Exercises in Style* (1958)] Raymond Queneau uses another constraint, the S+7, which replaces every noun in a text with the seventh noun after it in a dictionary. These techniques will be used in order to break literary automatism and hold up any expectation the reader might envisage. For the Oulipians, therefore, a constraint is the element that allows a multiplicity of combinations and, sometimes, triggers the creation of unexpected meaning. But what is the intention behind these combinations? Are the Oulipians mere entertainers? Are they just celebrating language automatism or is their experimentalism a way to report on the dangers of such automatism? In this final section, I will try to answer these questions and I will contrast them to the open social commitment of the COBRA. For different reasons both experimental groups rejected inspiration and the automatism of the Surrealists. At the same time they both influenced the writing of *La fosse Babel*. Therefore, a closer reading of the tensions of these different experimentalisms that influenced Calvino and Cortázar (as well as the other authors of the art-book) will shed some light in the progression of their own experimental projects.

For Oulipian founder, François Le Lionnais, “la poésie est un art simple et tout d’exécution” [“poetry is a simple art, consisting in mere execution”], for not the meaning but the production of text is at stake. Gérard Genette refers to the Oulipo techniques as “*playful transformations*.”⁶⁰ For Genette: “Chance is at the helm; no semantic intention is at work, nothing ‘tendentious’ or premeditated ... Oulipism, like the roulette, is a game of chance.”⁶¹ It is apparent that for some Oulipians meaning was a secondary and not necessary outcome of their linguistic experiments. Oulipo member Jacques Roubaud, however, disagrees with these readings and argues that Genette misunderstands Oulipo because there is, according to him, always an intention behind their exercises.⁶² Alison James, in “Automatism, Arbitrariness, and the Oulipian Author,” also pays attention the existence of semantic intention behind the experiments of the “Oulipian

⁶⁰ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, tr. Channa Newman & Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 48.

⁶¹ Genette 48.

⁶² Mathews 41.

machine.” In order to discuss the existence of an intention, and whether this intention wants to communicate a conscious meaning, she contrasts the Oulipian’s predilection for constraints with the Surrealist’s automatic writing: “The distinction lies in the Oulipo’s insistence on the *conscious* use of rules, whereas Surrealist automatism is that of unimpeded unconscious production.”⁶³

But this does not resolve the tension between the lack of semantic intention proposed by Genette and Roubault’s argument for meaning. Quite the opposite, for as James indicates, “it exacerbates the problem, since in Oulipian automatism a mechanical function replaces the human mind (however unconscious) of the Surrealist.”⁶⁴ James, then, discusses this paradox by referencing examples of Oulipian texts in which semantic intention is employed even when a mechanical constraint is in operation. According to her, the semantic intention is not placed on the text in order to access a different and more meaningful level of reality (such was the purpose of the Surrealists). On the contrary, the employment of a constraint triggers a serendipitous chain of events from which meaning emerges (if so) through combination. Thus, meaning is not something previously hidden in the unconscious or a conscious message that the author wants to communicate, but rather what necessarily happens (sometimes) when someone constantly and mechanically shuffles with different semiotic elements. In fact, meaning is already embedded in the semiotic elements and their combination only makes it evident to the reader.

In *Exercises in Style*, for example, Queneau puts into practice the S+7 constraint in one of the 99 texts that describe the same story: an altercation between two passengers on a bus, and another encounter between the same two men two hours later at the Gare St. Lazare. As James persuasively insists, the noun substitutions made by Queneau are not “accidental” and “they demonstrate (in a sometimes unnerving way) the extent to which a text’s meaning depends on the reader’s sense-making activity.” Thus the author is not only an “operator,” but a conscious experimentalist that, by revealing the mechanism of sense-making, could (although it is not necessary) awake the reader, and turn he/she into an active decodifier (make him/her conscious)

⁶³ Alison James, “Automatism, Arbitrariness, and the Oulipian Author,” *French Forum* 31.2 (Spring 2006): 113.

⁶⁴ James 113.

of his/her own automatised (unconscious) linguistic experience. Queneau, in fact, does not only substitute the nouns, he sometimes does not follow the constraint in order to adapt the elements to the source text and, as James stresses, “retain a level of grammatical and syntactic coherence.”⁶⁵

In Perec’s *A Void* the lipogram also blocks authorial choice, accentuating the machine-like production of text. Nonetheless, the fact that the author had to reflect on every word of the narrative in order to not include any “e” also turns the writing into “an intentional, conscious use of language over the automatism of spontaneous writing.”⁶⁶ I would argue, however, that aside from the liberating effects of the arbitrary, James does not discuss the ultimate meaning of that intentionality. Oulipians do put into practice conscious exercises in which language takes a preeminent role, but sometimes their mechanical experimentation produces a void after we run through a few iterations of Queneau’s *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, for instance. There was indeed a necessity to abandon the “careless” expression of the Surrealists and become more conscious of the production of meaning, but the Oulipo still focuses more on the potentiality of form and the chance of semantic meaning (any meaning) than in its political or social function – elements almost always located in the more obviously coherent semiotic material delivered by conventionally conceptualised texts.

Returning to *La fosse the Babel* we find that a material constraint limits the potentiality of the art-book. The sense of constraint and shuffling, and the centrality of chance in getting one or another result, however, stems from these Oulipian techniques that I am disclosing here. Oulipian Jacques Bens notes that chance is central to Oulipian experiments and, in order to disentangle it from the automatic writing of the Surrealists, he states that even if the results are uncertain, ultimately it is not a matter of total chance because (thanks to the constraint) we know possibilities are limited: “We know perfectly well everything that can happen, but we don’t know whether it will happen. Here as elsewhere, we shall ask the reader to understand what we shall

⁶⁵ James 115.

⁶⁶ James 118.

talk about.”⁶⁷ Once more, the game is for the reader to play; only the reader will come out with a result – they limit themselves to show that potentiality.

In any case, chance is not the only surrealist tension we find when approaching *La fosse de Babel*. If we return to the fragments I translated at the beginning of this chapter, we quickly realise that any dialogue that we establish will be quite nonsensical. The phrases were not written in order to create a definitive meaning; on the contrary, the dialogue long ago lost its originality and *raison d'être*, even before its potential contingent rearrangement. Surrealists also conceived of literature as a game and gave a pre-eminent role to irrationalism. For them, only the language of the subconscious, that which we are unable to create through reason, will open up the gate to a deeper reality – a sur-reality – and liberate us from the strains of reason. Breton wonders: “Why should I not expect more of the dream sign than I do of a daily increasing degree of consciousness?”⁶⁸ The language of the unconscious, in fact, might resemble that of the Babelian sentences scattered in the ditch. The authors have heard them and reproduced them in the way an author would “automatically” reproduce an inner voice emerging from the unconscious. In a Surrealist manner, the authors of *La fosse de Babel* might still be interested in the other; in this case, those voices that Surrealism insisted that Western society had buried. However, no transcendent narrative or ultimate meaning arises once the stickers have been placed on the pages (or, at least, if that happens it would be to serendipitously prove that the other orders would not hold logic – whether conscious or unconscious).

The COBRA members, like the Oulipians, were opposed to inspiration and Surrealism. In fact, their antipathy towards Surrealism stems from the conviction that the Parisian Surrealists became a closed group relying exclusively on internal inspiration rather than external contingency.⁶⁹ In the COBRA manifesto, the artist Constant writes that their ideal is to re-create a movement similar to the first avant-gardes; they wanted to lead a renewal of the world of art,

⁶⁷ Motte 67.

⁶⁸ Breton, *Manifestoes* 12.

⁶⁹ For a study of the group COBRA see Willemijn Stokvis, *COBRA: The Last Avant-garde Movement of the Twentieth Century* (London: Lund Humphries: 2004).

reacting against Bretonian Surrealism, mysticism and the Dada movement, and anything that, according to their members, proved to be hollow, superficial and non-committal. They were a group of painters, poets and artists coming from all kinds of different disciplines that rejected tradition and chose experimentation but, at the same time, they were searching for a social meaning in life and art after the Second World War. Constant, indeed, writes that “painters after World War II see themselves confronted by a world of stage decors and false façades in which all lines of communication have been cut and all hope has vanished.”⁷⁰ Thus they need to reconstruct that hope through their own art.

For COBRA, “fantasy art” does not have to be linked with dreams and the unconscious; the group is primarily interested in all forms of primitive art, with the free expression of children widening the purview of their experimentation.⁷¹ Instead of automatism, COBRA proposes experiment and spontaneity, while their objective is not, like Breton’s, to allow the dream-state to dominate waking life. On the contrary, they want to achieve a “true life.” Asger Jorn, one of the founders of the group, rewrites Breton’s definition of Surrealism with COBRA experimentalism in mind as follows:

The purpose of our experimentation is to allow thought to be expressed spontaneously, without being ruled by reason. This irrational spontaneity allows us to access the vital source of our life. Our aim is to escape the rule of reason –which is and always has been nothing under other than the idealised rule of the bourgeoisie – in order to achieve the reign of life.⁷²

We have studied that for this group collaboration was vital. The contact of painters, poets and other types of artists within the group created various and original results. Even if inspiration was not the crux, they recreated an imaginary that was, according to their aesthetics, more concerned with the drawbacks that European society was experiencing after the brutality of the War, than the momentary flashes provided by inspiration.

⁷⁰ “The Case Was Settled” (1948) trans. Leonard Bright, online, *Situationist International Online*, Internet, 4 February 2015. Available: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/manifesto.html>

⁷¹ See Stokvis.

⁷² Stokvis 188.

It is unquestionable that even if Oulipians and COBRA members had the need to criticise the Surrealists for reproducing (unconsciously) that same language they were fighting against inspiration was not enough if they had to rebuild the bases of Western society. Instead, a careful and reflective praxis was what was truly necessary. COBRA artists had the avant-gardist intention of reconnecting art to social praxis, and this is what they communicated straightforwardly. However, the Oulipians are experimentalists that do not make direct social judgement; they prefer to juggle with the semiotic machine of language and evidence its inner mechanism in the attempt. The direct artistic and political engagement sets the COBRA group apart, then, from both the Surrealists and the Oulipians. In fact, perhaps the experiments of the Surrealists and the experiments of the Oulipians, as we see, share more elements than they would admit. Even though Oulipo members rejected Surrealism, we realise that they probably owe them more than any of them admitted. Genette notes this influence:

This confidence [the Oulipian] in the “poetic” (semantic) productivity of chance clearly belongs to the Surrealist tradition, and Oulipism is a variant of the *cadaver exquis* – exquisite corpse ... The great merit – perhaps the only one – of Surrealism is to have revealed, through its own experiments, that a throw of the dice will never abolish meaning.⁷³

In fact Roubault refers to them as cousins because they all have a common ancestor: the works of Alfred Jarry and the affiliation to the *Collège de ‘pataphysique* of which, as I already discussed, Cortázar was honorary member.

Recapitulating, we have seen that there is in *La fosse de Babel* a certain degree of carelessness among the stickers in regard to the meaning of the authors’ sentences, but this carelessness cohabits with a caring expectancy towards the performance of the reader – without whose participation the book is not complete. The limited distribution of *La fosse de Babel* and the importance that its authors gave to its materiality emphasises an interest in texts’ physical manifestations. For these experimentalists, and especially for the ones reunited in COBRA, the material that an artist takes in his/her hands is what prompts creative expression as, by analogy

⁷³ Stokvis 188.

with Karl Marx's theory, the political and cultural history of man is derived from his/her economic history: "As far as we are concerned, the true source of art can only be found in matter. We are painters and for us materialism is, first and foremost, a sensual experience: sensual experience of the world and sensual experience of the paint."⁷⁴ This was how Constant voiced the feelings of the experimental group in the magazine *COBRA 2*. For them artwork was therefore spawned from a "dialectical discussion of the artist with its material."⁷⁵ The importance of the reader as a holder of that materiality, in cutting and pasting, like a child, the coloured sentences in order to make sense out of nonsense, or nonsense out of nonsense, becomes the book's real dialogue (and pleasure). However, the fact that *La fosse de Babel* is of limited availability and great expense and urges its own wasteful destruction (the stickers can only be used once), one could bring forward a critique of the commodity into play with this theory of non-alienation. About these political contradictions that were gaining ground after the nationwide protests of May '68, I will discuss in the following two chapters, both dedicated exclusively to analyse Calvino's and Cortázar's politics and the relation of their commitment with their experimentalism.

⁷⁴ Stokvis 194.

⁷⁵ Stokvis 194.

CHAPTER 5: CALVINO'S DOUBLE ENGAGEMENT

1. Calvino's Cultural Tension

Calvino joined the Italian Resistance against the German Nazis and the Fascist Italian regime in 1943 when he was just twenty, and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1945. From before his first publications, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947) [*The Path to the Spider's Nest* (1957)]¹ and *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1949) [*The Crow Comes Last*]², then, Calvino was a fully convinced Communist dedicated to the cause, as well as a partisan who had experienced imprisonment and several dangerous situations around the time of Italy's liberation. According to Calvino the Communists were organised enough to change the difficult social and cultural climate that overshadowed Europe after the Second World War:

La mia scelta del comunismo non fu affatto sostenuta da motivazioni ideologiche. Sentivo la necessità di partire da una “tabula rasa” e perciò mi ero definito anarchico ... Ma soprattutto sentivo che in quel momento quello che contava era l'azione; e i comunisti erano la forza più attiva e organizzata.

My choice for Communism was not made upon ideological motivations. I felt the need to start over from a “tabula rasa” and for this I defined myself anarchic ... But most of all I felt that at that time what counted was action; and the Communists were the most active and organised force.³

This political action was not removed from his writing; he wrote various articles and short stories for Communist newspapers and magazines such as *La nostra lotta*, *Il Garibaldino*, *L'Unità*, *Rinascita* and *Politecnico*. Hélène Leroy dedicates a chapter in *Italo Calvino. Imaginaire et rationalité* (1991) to elucidate the early politics of the Italian author, concluding that “pendant les dix premières années de l'après-guerre, la position de Calvino a été à la fois, d'une extrême clarté sur

¹ First translated as *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1957) by Archibald Colquhoun, and later as *The Path to the Spider's Nest* (1998) by Martin McLaughlin.

² It is a collection of short stories inspired by his own experiences fighting with the Garibaldi Brigades during the Second World War. They are written in a neorealist style but with fictional elements that predict his later interest in folktales. Some stories were translated into English and published in different compilations such as *Adam, One Afternoon, and Other Stories* (1957), *The Watcher and Other Stories* (1975), and *Difficult Loves* (1984).

³ Calvino, *Il paradosso* 23-24 (September-December 1960): 11-18; now in *Saggi*, vol. 2, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995) 2744-2745.

le plan politique et d'une totale ambiguïté sur le plan littéraire, au point que le jeune auteur va s'installer dans une véritable schizophrénie culturelle." ["during the first ten years after the war, the position of Calvino was at once of an extreme clarity on the political level and a total ambiguity on the literary plane, so that the young author dwelled in a true cultural schizophrenia."]⁴ Leroy is referring to the fact that Calvino's communist commitment did not prevent him from defending the supremacy of creativity in his fictional writing. In a letter to Eugenio Scalfari written in 1943 Calvino exclaims: "my art has been and always will be social while trying to remain art as far as possible."⁵ Leroy's diagnosis of a "true cultural schizophrenia," however, polarises Calvino's approach to literature, on the one hand, and social commitment, on the other, though such a division did not really exist. In 1949 the Italian published the aforementioned collection of short stories, *The Crow Comes Last*, based on his experiences in the war, and during the 1950s, he collected 200 Italian folktales in *Fiabe italiane* (1956)⁶ [*Italian Folktales* (1962)]. This famous compilation was inspired by the study of the Russian formalist and folklorist Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928).⁷ Thus, for the young Calvino art and social commitment were indeed two realities he strove to combine in his writings but, as I will show in this section, rather than a schizophrenic division the young writer exploited a creative and political tension that helped to shape a conscious and consequent mature experimentalism.

Through the 1950s the Italian Resistance represented a total renewal of a cultural tradition that was still recuperating from fascism. Calvino explains, in a letter to Mario Motta sent in July 1950, that what pushed him towards socialism was not any particular vision or ideal to be reached but the need to be part of that renewal. Actually, ideals and utopias are the wrong way of

⁴ Hélène Leroy, "Politique et littérature chez Italo Calvino," *Italo Calvino. Imaginaire et rationalité*, ed. Aurore Frasson-Marin (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1991) 10.

⁵ Scalfari was an Italian law graduate, friend of Calvino, that had interests in politics and journalism. The letter was sent from San Remo on 5 June 1943. Calvino, *Letters 1941-1985*, ed. Michael Wood, trans. Martin McLaughlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 27.

⁶ Calvino, *Fiabe italiane*, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1992).

⁷ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas, 1968).

posing the problem in trying to understand the Italian author; instead, his attitude towards the renewal tends to be humble and pragmatic. Thus, the problem for him “is precisely that of being aware of one’s own relativity, of becoming master of it, and knowing how to deal with this relativity.”⁸ In fact, this relativity is something that we detect in Calvino from an early stage and will continue to accompany him throughout his career – we have already seen in the preceding chapters how he has frequent recourse to such relativistic approaches in his fiction; we just need to think of his *Cosmicomics*, designed to knock down any absolute or essentialist ideas of truth, and also the relativistic structure of *The Path of Crossed Destinies*, where the interpretation of tarot cards potentiates possible narratives. This is a first indicator that Calvino’s fictions are never to be framed with radical ideologies but perform an aesthetic openness that reminds of Eco’s thesis of the open work discussed in Chapter 1. We should look, then, at the structure of Calvino’s narrative if we want to find out where the commitment is forged.

I will return to Eco’s thesis and will study the influence of structuralism on Calvino’s work in due course, but now, firstly, I will focus on his more strictly political engagements during the 1950s. It is worth mentioning his active collaboration with the official Communist daily, *L’Unità* as well as with the Communist political magazine, *Rinascita*. He also published one of his most famous political essays ‘Il midollo del leone’ (1955) in the Italian literary magazine *Paragone*. In this essay Calvino reflects upon the current Italian literature of the left and, in particular, discusses the lack of integration in Italy between the intellectual and the social, popular reality:

I tentativi di *Bildung-roman* politico ... che s’affollarono nei primi anni dopo la Liberazione, sembrarono la più naturale via per testimoniare sulla Resistenza, ma non riuscirono a rappresentare con accento di verità né il travaglio interiore dei protagonisti né quello epico e collettivo del popolo.

The attempts of a political *Bildung-roman* ... that thronged in the early years after the Liberation, seemed the most natural way to witness the Resistance, but they could not really represent the inner struggle of the protagonists nor that epic and collective of the people.⁹

⁸ Calvino, *Letters* 57.

⁹ Calvino, “Il midollo del leone,” *Una pietra a sopra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995) 8.

As far as the Italian cultural prospect is concerned, the young Calvino reacts against the two most eminent currents, *neorealismo e ermetismo* [neorealism and hermeticism] for being products of post-war Italy that needed to be overcome. The writing, for Calvino, should not be either excessively ideological and party-political or too obscure and incomprehensible. Throughout his letters we read notes of warning against the neorealist writers who still worked for the Party, as in the following, which was sent to Valentino Gerratana on the 18th of October 1950:

Today there is the tendency toward the Official-Party-Writer, like Fadeyev, like Aragon, who end up not saying anything because they say what the Party, as the Party, has already said. But I believe that writers who make their own experiences, who sniff the wind, and provide announcements and alerts as subjects of study and work for the Party, are of more immediate *usefulness*.¹⁰

This letter of resignation from the Party, addressed to the Secretariats of the “G. Pintor” cell and of the 2nd “A. Gramsci” section, the Secretariat of the Turin Federation, the Secretariat of the Italian Communist Party, and the editorial board of *L’Unità* on the 1st of August 1957 offers more evidence of Calvino’s changing position:

I have never believed (not even with the early zeal of the neophyte) that literature was that sad thing that many in the Party preached, and in fact the very poverty of Communism’s official literature acted as a spur to me to try to bring a touch of creative felicity to my work as a writer.¹¹

It is difficult to deny in Calvino a creative felicity, and it is not for nothing his good friend and mentor Cesare Pavese referred to him as the “squirrel of the pen” for his ability “to climb into the trees, more for fun than fear, to observe partisan life as a fable of the forest.”¹² But, despite this felicity, Calvino positions himself amongst those “che credono in una letteratura che sia presenza attiva nella storia, in una letteratura come educazione, di grado e di qualità insostituibile” [“who believe in a literature that has an active presence in history, in a literature as

¹⁰ Calvino, *Letters* 72.

¹¹ Calvino, *Letters* 136.

¹² Pavese’s review the *The Path to the Spider’s Nest* for the magazine *l’Unità* on 26th Sep. 1947. See Weiss 39.

education, of an irreplaceable grade and quality”]¹³ – and this is the main commitment which, as Vittorio Spinazzola remarks, remains throughout his work.¹⁴

On the other hand, if Calvino’s warnings already suggested discontentment regarding the path that culture was taking under Communism, comments made in 1957, when he was thirty-four years of age, after a serious split in the Party, made it clear that he had finally made the decision to resign and move on from activism. His resignation occurred soon after Giuseppe Di Vittorio (chief of the Italian Communist trade union), Antonio Giolitti (a prominent member of the Party) and Pietro Nenni (national secretary of the Italian Socialist Party, which had strong links to the PCI) repudiated the position of the leadership (which included Palmiro Togliatti and Giorgio Napolitano) for their support to the Soviet Union in its suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. The Soviets regarded the Revolution for democracy as a counter-revolutionary upheaval and crushed it, invading Budapest and other regions of the country and killing thousands of people. These actions were not supported by some members of the Italian Party, and Calvino, after realising that a real unity would take a long time and it was not in their willpower to achieve it, decided to leave: “I left the Party after Giolitti because Giolitti is the man who has shown himself in this crisis to have the most sound moral personality and most independence of judgement and most decisiveness.”¹⁵

This ideological and political crisis meant the end of the Resistance for Calvino, for whom we see that by then “independence of judgement” was of high value. In his letter of resignation he expresses his regret that the PCI did not put itself at the head of the international renewal of Communism when they had the chance. Instead, the Party placed their energies on the struggle against the “revisionists” that were trying to introduce “innovative” proposals rather than fight the dogmatism that was still globally present.¹⁶ In spite of its supposedly “progressive culture”

¹³ Calvino, “Il midollo 26.

¹⁴ Vittorio Spinazzola, “L’io diviso di Italo Calvino,” *Italo Calvino. Atti del convegno internazionale*, ed. G. Falaschi (Milan: Garzanti, 1988) 104.

¹⁵ Calvino, *Letters* 141.

¹⁶ Calvino, *Letters* 134-135.

and instead of responding to internal disagreements and finding new ways to sort out their problems, the Communist Party closed itself up in the rigidity of the formula *neorealista*. According to Calvino, the Italian Party was in fact busier combating internal disparities than joining forces to fight the real danger. Nonetheless, that decision left him feeling even more worn out by public responsibilities than when he was in the Party, because holding a Party card, in his own words: “often took the place of my conscience; now this is not the case, I find myself facing history without intermediaries for the first time.”¹⁷

He henceforth considered himself a new type of Communist, an “ex-Communist who remains a Communist;”¹⁸ a Communist that – paradoxically – had to develop “independence of judgement” in order to embark upon the difficult search of re-establishing the meaning of the relationships that an individual has to acquire with history and a writer with his oeuvre. To put an end to his party affiliation, in July 1957, Calvino published a pointed political parable in *Città aperta* (a magazine that gathered critical communist writings), “La gran bonaccia delle Antille.” This is a parable in which a sailor tells a story about a corsair ship – that represents the PCI – of Sir Francis Drake’s fleet – that represents Stalin – which due to an unexpected dead calm remains still for months in front of a Papist galleon – representing the Democrazia Cristiana. The captain – Palmiro Togliatti, the secretary of the PCI – does not fight to leave the dead calm or battle against the galleon. This tale, therefore, is to be read as an allegorical denunciation of the paralysis of the Italian Communist Party that he was reproving in his letters.¹⁹

Parallel to his personal realisations and his constant discomfort in positioning himself, 1956 is considered to be the beginning of the Italian *neovanguardia*, which brought new ideas and renewed hopes to young Italian authors. Fabio Gambaro establishes that the new avant-garde movement in Italy consisted of two distinct periods: from 1956, when the first issue of the cultural magazine *il Verri* was launched and Edoardo Sanguineti published *Laborintus*, up to 1962, when Eco

¹⁷ Calvino, *Letters* 141.

¹⁸ Calvino, *Letters* 141-142.

¹⁹ Giorgio Baroni, *Italo Calvino. Introduzione e guida allo studio dell'opera calviniana* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1988) 9.

published *The Open Work*; and a second period that dates from 1963, with the creation of the group of intellectuals Gruppo 63, up to 1969, with the last issue of the magazine *Quindici* (which was founded in 1967 by members of the Gruppo).²⁰

The Gruppo 63 was formed through the reunion of intellectuals at the Hotel Zagarella, in the ancient city of Solunto, near Palermo (Sicily). The gathering took place between the 3rd and the 8th of October 1963 among thirty writers. The name of the group followed the idea of the German Gruppe 47, which in turn followed the initiative of Hans Werner Richter, and counted among its members with authors such as Günther Grass, Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Weiss. The Italian group of writers and poets were inspired by the modernist writers Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and hoped for a renovation of language and formal experimentation that was less preoccupied about reporting “real” historical events than reporting “real” artistic advances. This group included Italian authors such as Sanguineti, Eco, Antonio Porta, and Giorgio Manganelli. The literary renewal proposed by the group can be better understood if we remember Eco’s concept of the open work, for they focused on a renovation that involved adjusting the form (a form that reproduced the disorder of modernity) to the new order connected to scientific, technological and social development of the time. The Italianist scholar John Picchione elucidates the theoretical debate that was taking place among the members of the Gruppo to conclude that they “sparked the most daring and iconoclastic literary debate witnessed by Italy in the second half of the twentieth century.” Indeed, as Picchione remarks, Eco defined the group as “the gathering place for people with whom I consider worthwhile to argue,”²¹ and Calvino, twenty years later, stated that the Gruppo was “the last attempt to draw a general map of literature.”²²

In the early 1960s Calvino started editing a cultural magazine with Elio Vittorini entitled *Il Menabò*. In this magazine he published good examples of essays committed to that renewal of the

²⁰ For an insightful analysis on their different aesthetic and politic visions, see John Picchione’s *The New Avant-Garde in Italy. Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 46.

²¹ Picchione 47.

²² Picchione 47.

cultural Italian society mostly written by members of the Gruppo. A particularly good example of his own critical writing appears in the seventh issue of *Il Menabò*, under the title “L’antitesi operaia” (1964). In this essay Calvino reflects upon the development of his own political discourse, the role of the Italian proletarian and the problematic of the left, expressing his reserves towards the “new left” and the need of re-examining the cultural tendencies with a renovated critical conscience.²³ In “The Proletarian Anti-thesis” the Italian author condemns both contemporary writers’ rebellious positions such as the American beatniks, maintaining that only those who live in a safe system – like the capitalist American system – are able to rebel without really shaking its pillars; and the more formal literary experimentation practiced by the French writers of the *nouveau roman* because, as we have studied, their linguistic passivity signified for Calvino the defeat of judgement amidst a very fierce historical situation.²⁴

Calvino had a broad influence in Italian culture, mostly attained through the contacts that he made working for one of the most famous Italian publishing houses, the Giulio Einaudi Editore, and he had direct contact with the experimental authors of the Gruppo through the publication of *Il Menabò*. In fact, he kept up a correspondence with some of the members, in particular with Sanguineti, Eco, Alfredo Giuliani, Manganelli, Francesco Leonetti, Franco Lucentini and Amelia Rosselli. However, in spite of his interest in renewing the Italian cultural scene, he never considered himself a new avant-gardist and his involvements with the Gruppo were always critical. Proof of this position is that after attending one of their meetings in La Spezia in 1966, Calvino expresses scepticism towards the ideas that these new avant-gardists were defending on the matter of writing. In a letter to François Wahl (a structuralist editor involved in the French avant-garde publication *Tel Quel*) Calvino complains about the following:

(1) the weakness of the critics (apart from Sanguineti, whose authority is indisputable; and Manganelli, who develops his ingenious theoretical exploits always several meters above the object of discussion) and the feeling that from the critical point of view the group’s work is simply marking time, and that a considerable number of the texts are above the critical abilities of the group;

²³ Calvino, “L’antitesi operaia,” *Una pietra* 139.

²⁴ Calvino, “L’antitesi 126-127.

(2) the implicit (Sanguinetian) terrorism in the name ‘avant-garde’ which places a veto against all attempts at success on the part of the work...

(3) the terrorism of those (especially young members) for whom avant-garde means the refusal of any plan for literary structure²⁵

Calvino acknowledges that social realism has become inadequate to represent the realities of his time, but the Italian “structureless” avant-gardist practices and their weak critical apparatus did not convince him either. For Calvino, the crisis of Realism was already evident in the historical avant-garde movements of Cubism and Futurism, characterised by an “ottimismo storicista” [“historical optimism”] that contrasted a more “viscerale” [“visceral”] avant-garde in which he includes Surrealism and Expressionism.²⁶ Although Calvino is persuaded that all these avant-garde currents have brought formal experimentation that had a historical validity when they appeared, he rejects them because they represent an “spinta ... esistenzial-religiosa” [“existential and religious thrust”] that, according to Picchione, “does not coincide with [Calvino’s] idea of a writer guided by the project of Enlightenment.”²⁷

In “The Sea of Objectivity,” Calvino had already stated that the “visceral” current of the avant-gardes lost the dialectical tension between subject and object, which represented the death of the self, absorbed by the world of objects.²⁸ Picchione argues that Calvino, after rejecting the experimentalism of the Italian new avant-garde, settles for a more conventional style, but I think the critic forgets the cultural tension of Italy at that time. We have seen that Calvino, despite rejecting the Italian and the French new avant-garde, is always interested in finding new forms – as, indeed, proves the fact he joined the Oulipo. His almost pathologic resistance to any school of thought or aesthetic tendency before moving to France is proof of his non-conformism.²⁹ It seems that he was not interested in the aesthetic brawls of his Italian compatriots, and that for him experimenting did not, then, involve adhering to a group in order to break with the past, but

²⁵ Calvino, *Letters* 315.

²⁶ Picchione 40.

²⁷ Picchione 41.

²⁸ This rejection is linked to the rejection of the *nouveau roman* style already discussed in the preceding chapter. First published in *Il Menabò*, 2. “Il mare dell’oggettività,” *Una pietra* 48-56.

²⁹ The Italianist Carla Benedetti also foregrounds this pathologic resistance in her short, very critical study *Pasolini contro Calvino. Per una lettura impura* (Pisa: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998) 97.

in recovering old structures in order to make their mechanistic organisation explicit.³⁰ For example, as we have seen in *Cosmicomics* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, his aesthetics always includes a revision of the literary forms of the past – particularly the folktale – and the carefully constructed scaffolding that supports the tales and the cyclical nature of myths which, as I have explained in the preceding chapter, springs from his readings of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and other French structuralists and semioticians. In “Cybernetics and Ghosts” Calvino says: “...myth acts on fable as a repetitive force, obliging it to go back on its tracks even when it has set off in directions that appear to lead somewhere completely different.”³¹ But it would not be until 1973, when he joined the Oulipo, that he began to identify his structural experimentalism with a group.

At the same time, however, putting aside Picchione’s assertions and Calvino’s personal rejection of the Italian movement, the truth is that Calvino always showed a clear interest in the new avant-garde writers in spite of his rejection to emulate their practices. We have seen that he was responsible for publishing most of the writers of the Gruppo 63 throughout the existence of *Il Menabò* (between 1959 and 1967), to the extent that the magazine was considered a laboratory of the Italian new avant-garde.³² Gambaro stresses that Calvino and Vittorini were selective and very conscious with their publications:

Oltretutto, la rivista accordava ancora piena fiducia al valore morale della letteratura e alla sua funzione positiva nei confronti della realtà: l’ipotesi della rivista era quella di una cultura che sapesse utilizzare al meglio tutti gli apporti delle nuove discipline, integrandoli in un progetto poetico capace di rendere conto della modernità in tutta la sua complessità, non tanto per farsi travolgere dal suo grado di irrazionalità, ma piuttosto per contribuire ad una chiarificazione.

Besides, the magazine rendered full faith to the moral value of literature and its positive function at confronting reality: the hypothesis of the magazine was a culture that knew to better use the products of the new discipline, integrating them in a poetic project able to

³⁰ The Italian writer Renato Barilli criticises Calvino for this conventionalism and inability to break with the past. According to Barilli, conventional writers like Calvino are not interested in exploring new territories and are guided by a “velleitarismo moralistico ... una scelta emotiva fatta per mettere la coscienza a posto” [“foolish moralistic ambition ... an emotional choice made for keeping the conscience at peace”]. Renato Barilli, *La barriera del naturalismo* (Milan: Mursia, 1980) 308. Angelo Guglielmi criticises the “outdated discourse to which humanistic culture is attracted,” in reference to the humanistic project of Calvino, in Picchione 43. Both Barilli and Guglielmi were part of the Gruppo 63, the Italian new avant-garde group that we have seen Calvino never fully supported.

³¹ Calvino, “Cybernetics 19.

³² Fabio Gambaro, *Invito a conoscere la neovanguardia* (Milan: Mursia, 1993) 30.

represent modernity in its complexity, not so much to work on its irrational degree, but to contribute to its clarification.³³

They were looking, therefore, for a literature adjusted to their contemporaneity. Thus, Calvino's general lack of convincement and commitment to any group or closed ideology did not mean he did not follow their discussions attentively.

In fact, in a letter to the political philosopher Norberto Bobbio, in 1964, Calvino fights to find a definition that sets him apart from the new avant-gardists and adjusts to his interests. At some point he comes to the conclusion that he might be a "reformist," and he comes to this realisation precisely because he does not want to fall into any label or into the same trap that, according to him, revolutionary polemics had fallen. Revolutionary polemics, for Calvino, had been absorbed by the system of the ruling class whereas reformism still held the humanist ideal that he aspired to. He writes:

In order to save itself from this trap, such reformism has to be able to count on the strength of the international workers' movement ... In short, I'd like to have the cake of proletarian universalism and be able also to eat historical and technical rationality: the two halves of an ideal humanism which now seem more irreconcilable than ever.³⁴

This cultural tension or "engaged disengagement" manifests a dialectical position, not simply political but also literary. We have seen that during these years Calvino also published *Cosmicomics*, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and a collection of short stories *Gli amori difficili* (1970) [*Difficult Loves* (1984)]. All these publications follow the coherent development of his interests in anthropology and myth, as well as for science and structuralism, and include a formal tension in regard to the direction that the modernisation of literature should take.³⁵ Despite not focusing on strictly political causes, then, his fictions are indubitably part of a political personal project which he never abandoned.

³³ Gambaro 31.

³⁴ Calvino, *Letters* 276-277.

³⁵ Calvino was fond of the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer and his major work *The Golden Bough* (1922) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories of myth. For a study of this influence see Margareth Hagen's "The Visual in *Cosmicomics*: Myth and Classical Rhetoric," in *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino: Writing Visibility*, ed. Birgitte Grundtvig, Martin McLaughlin and Lene Waage Petersen (London: Legenda, 2007) 48-59.

From 1965 Calvino was nearly always in Paris, where he settled with his family until 1980. This was a period in which, as Barengi asserts, “la capitale francese torna – a tutt’oggi, per l’ultima volta – a imporsi come la capitale culturale dell’Occidente, almeno per quanto riguarda la cultura letteraria e le scienze umane.” [“the French capital again establishes itself – to this day for the last time – as the cultural capital of the West, at least with regard to the literary culture and the humanities.”]³⁶ Although he never completely abandoned a selective position towards closed definitions, arguably it was in Paris where Calvino found certain currents, such as structuralism and the literary experimentation of the Oulipo, which adjust to his literary project.

This is not the case, however, regarding the outbursts of May 1968, in which he did not get involved and in fact describes from the position of spectator. From his letters we know that he was in Holland with his wife Chichita, and they returned to Paris in time to witness the occupations of the Sorbonne. He explains that throughout the occupation they travelled to Italy to pick up their baby Giovanna and vote in the general elections of May 19th. Due to the French general strike, they then became stuck in Italy and could not return to Paris for some time. Calvino writes that they finally decided to hire a car in Turin, pack some cans of petrol and head back to Paris, where they experienced the general chaos of the city. Calvino describes the Parisian climate in one of his letters to Michele Rago dated 27th July 1968:

There we lived through the extraordinary days of the car-less and metro-less city, with the queues outside the shops. Then there was De Gaulle’s speech, the Gaullists’ cars going round, horns blaring, trying to penetrate the Latin Quarter and getting sent back, the Sorbonne like a fortress under siege, with mercenaries from Katanga lying in wait, and the young people expecting the worse and cursing the Communists. Nights during which no one did anything but go around on foot, amidst constant alarms, in a climate of amazing excitement.³⁷

Although he found himself in the eye of the revolt, despite having been a committed Communist in the past, Calvino regards the events from the point of view of the spectator. The cause of his impartiality, however, is not straightforward. According to Barengi, Calvino was unable to converge the political concreteness of political praxis with the utopic ideology of the new young

³⁶ Barengi, *Italo Calvino* 17.

³⁷ Calvino, *Letters* 354.

movement, and “di qui il senso di ‘inappartenenza’ che sarà per un certo periodo la nota dominante della posizione calviniana.” [“hence the sense of ‘un-belonging’ which will for a certain period dominate Calvino’s position.”]³⁸ Perrella, on the other hand, tells us that Calvino met Gianni Celati that same spring in Urbino in a conference on semiotics, and Celati quotes that the Italian author was very excited about the revolts:

Per tre giorni abbiamo parlato ininterrottamente, e lui era ancora eccitato da quello che aveva visto durante le giornate di maggio a Parigi. Ne parlava con straordinario entusiasmo; diceva che era andato in giro per le strade con un senso di liberazione; e mi raccontava che gli psicanalisti durante quelle giornate avevano perso tutta la clientela; e infine mi spiegava la sua sensazione di essersi levato dei pesi di dosso, e che adesso si sentiva di “voltare pagina.”

For three days we talked non-stop, and he was still excited by what he had seen during the days of May in Paris. He spoke with extraordinary enthusiasm; said this was going around the streets with a sense of liberation; and told me that psychoanalysts during those days lost all their customers; and finally explained to me his feeling of having lifted a weight off, and now he felt like “turning a page.”³⁹

This enthusiasm and feeling of freedom clashes with the tone of Calvino’s letters, from which we understand that he was afraid about the outcome of the revolts, in particular of unforeseen fascistic reactions. What he writes to Rago helps to understand his fear:

It seems to me that something really is changing in Europe. We are certainly moving toward a new revolutionary force, which also includes the workers, whereas by now the road the Communist parties are on is as irreversible as the one taken by social democrats on the eve of the First World War. The question as to how far the reaction will move down the road toward fascism does not seem to worry the young revolutionaries ... I know that all I can say either follows old schemes or is totally up in the air ... basically I find myself in the ideal position of being a spectator: things are happening that interest me profoundly, that correspond in general terms to what I wanted to see happen (even though I would have been unable to foresee them clearly) and my participation in them is not called for, in fact it is ruled out. This is something that saves my conscience and allows me to relax fully; what more could I ask for?⁴⁰

As we see, Calvino holds a dialectical position in regards to the Parisian upheavals, surely because he considers the insurgents as members of a different generation, and feels “relaxed” about the fact he was not asked to participate in it. In another letter to Rago on 31st December 1968 he writes that “[w]hat’s happening in France still stays more remote even though I’m living

³⁸ Barengi, *Italo Calvino* 24.

³⁹ Silvio Perrella, *Calvino* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1999) 96.

⁴⁰ Calvino, *Letters* 355.

in the middle of it.”⁴¹ Calvino by that time was focusing his efforts in writing a critical piece on Charles Fourier, and his politics at the beginning of the 1970s continue to hold a similar tone of detachment:

for me the only possibility is the position of the spectator at a distance. This means I generate a lot of bad blood in myself without the satisfaction that doing something always brings, but I know that any immediate discourse I pronounced would be too full of ifs and buts, and I prefer to hypothesize a point in the future (a general context) when perhaps I'll be able to say things that are relevant and clear (also to myself) and useful.⁴²

During the years that he lived in Paris, then, Calvino opted for the role of the spectator, the observer who depicts the struggle unfolding outside in the streets with certain degree of freedom but from the boundaries of his house. If in the 1950s his main worry had been the opening up of literature to external influence in order to renovate the cultural climate of his country, in the late 1960s he, conversely, adopted a more cautious position and focused his efforts in the experimentalism of his work rather than its social commitment.

As Barengi emphasises, we have seen that throughout his career Calvino dissents from the irrational and visceral avant-garde position, he criticises the objectivism of the writers of the *nouveau roman*, and the ideological programme of the Italian experimentalists who coined themselves the new avant-gardists.⁴³ The only group he eventually became part of, as we have studied in the preceding chapter, was the Oulipo in 1973. When we consider Calvino's separatism, this uncharacteristic kinship with the French experimenters must be of great significance. We have seen that an anticipatory Parisian and Oulipian stamp can be traced in the combinatory machines of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and of *La Fosse de Babel*, but, as Barengi remarks, we cannot ignore that

nella visione calviniana Parigi conta anche, più generalmente, come immagine di città: una città plurima, una città che contiene molte città diverse. Non sarà un caso se proprio negli anni parigini Calvino elegge la città a simbolo centrale del proprio immaginario creativo (*Le città invisibili* esce nel 1972).

⁴¹ Calvino, *Letters* 360.

⁴² Calvino, *Letters* 383.

⁴³ For a list of various ideological rejections stated by Calvino see Barengi, *Italo Calvino* 27.

Calvino's version of Paris stands also, more generally, as an image of the city: a plural city, a city that contains many different cities. It will not be a coincidence that in the years he lived in Paris Calvino chooses the city as a symbol of his creative imagination (*Invisible Cities* was published in 1972).⁴⁴

Therefore, a closer study of *Invisible Cities* in the next section will prompt an understanding of Calvino's mature experimentalism, more closely linked to the more structural and relativistic undergoing experiments of the current French capital than the Italian scene. While Calvino fights to find a political and literary definition on a personal level, we will see that it is perhaps in this unsettled dialogue, in this cultural tension, that his engagement is shaped in his narrative.

2. Visible Experiments

According to some critics, in the book *Invisible Cities* published in 1972, Calvino focuses on the stylistic dimensions of the work of art and foregoes more ethically responsible engagement with social realities.⁴⁵ Calvino, developing, or "rewriting", as Bonsaver notes,⁴⁶ some of the themes of *The Travels of Marco Polo* – known as *Il Milione* in Italian – takes us to the end of the thirteenth century in Marco Polo's China and to the conquest period of the Tartar Empire. In this historical setting Calvino unfolds short poetic descriptions of the cities that Polo has encountered in his geographical itineraries. These descriptions are intermingled with dialogues between the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan and Polo that provide a metafictional level to Calvino's writing and a redefinition of the limits of fiction and its connections to history and other literary texts. Parisian semioticians accentuated the rational and ludic elements in Calvino's narrative and, according to Eugenio Bolongaro, "the attenuation of the overt reflection on the social and the political role of the intellectual."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Barengi, *Italo Calvino* 18.

⁴⁵ See Alessia Ricciardi, "Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity," *MLN* 114.5 (December 1999): 1062-1077.

⁴⁶ Bonsaver, "Il Calvino" 176.

⁴⁷ Eugenio Bolongaro, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) 194.

However, a more ethically responsible deed emerges when we address his formal undertaking and his exploration of language, set in dialogue with the time of its writing and his Italian political and cultural background. Bolongaro asserts that “this is the crucial point sometimes missed by postmodern readings,” and that “Calvino’s ethico-political tension remains fundamental to the author’s style.”⁴⁸ This tension is what I will disentangle in this section. In fact, the self-referential quality of the narrative, considering it is a rewriting of an old text, suggests an exhaustion of history as a neutral textual practice that not only marks a moving-on from modernist practices but also questions the validity of language itself (in a manner that also accords with postmodernist concerns). In a letter to Claudio Varese, Calvino affirms that “the sense the book has to convey is of something dense and overcrowded”⁴⁹ – something far more complex than that “lightness” used by some critics to qualify the novel. Calvino’s critical writings and letters, therefore, will also help to disclose this deeper commitment obviated by most of his scholars.

We have seen that Calvino’s incursions into contemporary political and literary affairs were always critical to the extent that he distrusted any militancy and preferred to maintain an unsettling dialectical position in regard to political life and literary groups. Even though he wished to undertake a literary renewal, his approaches to any sort of activism and visceral avant-garde experimentation were not fruitful, and only his individual reformist understanding and formalistic experimentation contributed to revitalise a cultural tradition that according to him was in need of renovation, as was the case in Italy during that period. With *Cosmicomics* we have seen that he reconciled modern science and even scientific writing with the world of fiction, putting both the reality of scientific writing and the fiction of the literary into question.

A reconciliatory position is also apparent in his earlier trilogy *I nostri antenati* (1960) [*Our Ancestors* (1962)] and the later duology *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *The Tavern of Crossed Destinies*. In these books Calvino recuperates the past, in particular the tradition of the folktale, in

⁴⁸ Bolongaro, *Italo Calvino* 194.

⁴⁹ Calvino, *Letters* 426.

order to re-integrate it into the current cultural climate, transforming a popular practice dating back to the Middle Ages into modern meta-fictional novels. Eventually, we have studied that he found his particular experiments to have an affinity with the experimental techniques of the French literary workshop Oulipo, and I would now like to show how all this works in his fictional writing of that time. Some regard *Invisible Cities* as an apolitical novel and stress that Calvino's renewal is purely formal – such is Ricciardi's position, for instance. But some, like Teresa de Lauretis, recognises that his books “carry the danger of being misunderstood by both sides of the political barricade”⁵⁰ because the political tension, as I will explore in this section, might be dialectically embedded in the structure of his fictional writing.

Invisible Cities takes us back to the end of the thirteenth century and the relentless domination of the Great Khan's Tartar empire. The book has no real plot and the entirety of its action consists of a dialogue between the Emperor and Polo. The Venetian merchant responds to the Kublai's desire to know the cities of his empire with poetic digressions about the places he has visited in his travelling. The sections of the book that contain these dialogues are differentiated in italics while the other sections, which refer to the different cities that Polo has seen, are organised under eleven different titles: Cities & Memory, Cities & Signs, Cities & Desire, Thin Cities, Trading Cities, Cities & Eyes, Cities & Names, Cities & the Dead, Cities & the Sky, Continuous Cities and Hidden Cities – every title consisting of five different cities with names of women such as Tamara, Diomira, Dorothea, Isaura, Octavia, Zoe, and so on and so forth.

The structure of the book is not apparent, and indeed critics have drawn different designs in order to find a logical pattern. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo followed a metric metaphor suggesting the book was composed of “sette stanze di sestina inquadrate da due stanze di sestina doppia” [“seven stanzas of sestina framed by two stanzas of double sestina”]⁵¹ while others have drawn tables, diagrams and graphics, some looking like chessboards that recall the emperor's devotion

⁵⁰ Teresa De Lauretis, “Narrative Discourse in Calvino: Praxis or Poiesis?” *MLA* 90.3 (1975): 414.

⁵¹ Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, “L'arco e le pietre,” *La tradizione del Novecento* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980) 410.

for chess⁵² – in fact, the Mongolian emperor declares: “Se ogni città è come una partita a scacchi, il giorno in cui arriverò a conoscerne le regole possiederò finalmente il mio impero, anche se mai riuscirò a conoscere tutte le città che contiene.” [“If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains.”]⁵³ Through these kinds of declarations we realise that Calvino gives great importance to the structure of the book to the extent that the emperor’s words could be read as meta-fictional reference. If we compare what the Great Khan says about knowing the cities to the act of reading, for instance, we might think that knowing the scaffolding of the novel provides the reader with an understanding of the book regardless of the exhaustive reading of all its elements. This allegory should not be read as a division between form and content, but as an operation that combines the poetics of fragmentation characteristic of the first avant-gardes with a sense of organicity characteristic of structuralism. This convergence generates a dialectical tension that I will demonstrate in this section.

Invisible Cities, regardless of its fragmentary structure, has an order that the reader discloses at the turn of its pages; a labyrinthine formula similar to the one sought by the Abbé Faria in another of Calvino’s tales, “Il Conte di Montecristo” [“The Count of Monte Cristo”] included in *t zero*. Faria states that escaping from prison is only possible in “individuare il punto in cui la fortezza pensata non coincide con quella vera per trovarla.” [“the point where the imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then find it.”]⁵⁴ This precise structure, therefore, is not as strict as it might appear. The constraint plays quite a gratuitous role in providing an order to the novel; as Claudio Milanini asserts, “l’autore si è imposto regole rigorose, tanto più severe quanto più arbitrariamente predeterminate; il lettore è sollecitato a seguire percorsi di lettura molteplici, travalicanti la progressione naturale delle pagine.” [“the author imposes strict

⁵² For a list of designs that critics have suggested, see Claudio Milanini, *L’utopia discontinua. Saggio su Italo Calvino* (Milan: Garzanti Editore, 1990) 145. He also proposes a graphic resembling a chessboard on 130-131.

⁵³ Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Milan: Mondadori, 1993) 121; *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997) 121.

⁵⁴ Calvino, *Tutte* 284; *t zero* 152.

rules, the more severe the more arbitrarily predetermined; the reader is urged to follow multiple paths of reading, which transcend the natural progression of the pages.”⁵⁵ Also Spinicci notes:

Nonostante la sua struttura ordinata ed il suo porsi come un dispositivo che, nel suo aderire ad un criterio esplicito, sembra promettere che ogni voce abbia una sua precisa ragione d'essere, *Le città invisibili* non sembrano essere il frutto di una fantasia ossessionata dall'ideale dell'esattezza e molti dei titoli sotto cui vengono raccolti di Marco sembrano variare indefinitamente i temi che per primi vengono esposti.

Despite its ordered structure and its display as a device which, in its explicit criterion, seems to promise that each entry has a precise *raison d'être*, *Invisible Cities* does not appear to be the result of a fantasy obsessed by perfect accuracy and many of the titles under which they are collected by Marco seem to vary indefinitely the themes that are first exposed.⁵⁶

Calvino's open closed structure, the fact that it is precise in its organisation but careless in its exactitude, therefore, also works as a meticulous dialectical device that supports the poetic value of the work.⁵⁷

Apart from this structure and the fact that there is no plot, we find that there is no characterisation of either Polo or Kublai in the work. These two figures are reduced to their legendary names and respond solely to historical associations, rather than to naturalist characterisation and plot points. What is left besides their dialogue is merely the narrating consciousness of Polo in the process of creating images about the cities of the empire. He, therefore, acts as a purely formal and substitutable phantom – another meta-fictional reference if we think of Calvino's position around the role of the author in “Cybernetics and Ghosts” where, as I noted before, the author becomes the assembler of the writing apparatus, the performer of a “methodical and objective labour”⁵⁸ for whom suddenly, “[a]t a certain moment things click into place, and one of the combinations obtained ... becomes charged with an unexpected meaning

⁵⁵ Milanini 128.

⁵⁶ Paolo Spinicci, “La cornice e le città,” *Il filosofo e le città*, eds. Anna Ichino e Marta Perego (Milan: CUEM, 2006) 30.

⁵⁷ It may be useful to remember Calvino's thoughts about constraints: “I shared with the Oulipo several ideas and predilections: the importance of constraints in literary works, the meticulous application of very strict rules of the game, the use of combinatory procedures, the creation of new works using pre-existing materials. The Oulipo would only allow operations conducted with rigor, convinced that poetic value can arise from extremely constraining structures.” Calvino, “Le Château 384.

⁵⁸ Calvino, “Cybernetics 23.

or unforeseen effect...”⁵⁹ In fact, following the position of Barthes in “The Death of the Author,” all the emphasis needs to fall on the text for this moment to occur, because the writing of the text conceals something bigger than the author’s conscious mind.

However, despite his efforts of hiding away from the narrative, Polo performs something that approaches the role of Calvino’s alter ego. The Italian author effectively constructs digressions of imaginary cities that respond to poetic inspirations, and only stops when his character argues his own functionality with the emperor – arguably Calvino’s counter-alter-ego – as, indeed, the Great Khan constantly puts into question the role of the Venetian merchant and his reliability: “Non è detto che Kublai Khan creda a tutto quel che dice Marco Polo quando gli descrive le città visitate nelle sue ambascerie, ma certo l’imperatore dei tartari continua ad ascoltare il giovane veneziano con più curiosità e attenzione che ogni altro suo messo o esploratore.” [“Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with great attention and curiosity.”]⁶⁰ As a matter of fact, we could also read that the emperor represents the reader, “straniero a ciascuno dei suoi sudditi” [“foreigner to each of [Polo’s] subjects”]⁶¹; always foreign to what the teller has to explain, and yet that reality only unwraps, only exists, in the action of reading/listening.

Besides the fact that the narrative works as a metaphor of the process of creation and reception, and all the interstitial spaces between them, another formal construction that we need to pay attention to is the texture of the book itself: its content, since it centres on the use and meaning of its own matter, signs (i.e. language). As I have stated, Polo uses poetic signs to describe the cities, but his Western language is incomprehensible to Kublai, and at the beginning of their conversation they need to communicate in gestures, leaps, grimaces and cries. Polo improvises pantomimes that the great emperor interprets, resulting in the emitter being able only

⁵⁹ Calvino, “Cybernetics 21.

⁶⁰ Calvino, *Le città 5; Invisible 5*.

⁶¹ Calvino, *Le città 21; Invisible 21*.

to communicate the experience imprecisely, and the receiver never really fully grasping it: “Il Gran Kan decifrava I segni, però il nesso tra questi e i luoghi visitati rimaneva incerto” [“The Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain”].⁶² As the book advances the Venetian comes to familiarise himself with the languages of the Levant, and Kublai begins to understand him, but not only the writing advances also the communicative act becomes clearer. Contrary to their expectations, however, their increased communication does not ease their mutual understanding; on the contrary language becomes an *obstacle* between them: “le parole servivano meglio degli oggetti e dei gesti ... tuttavia quando Polo cominciava a dire di come doveva essere la vita in quei luoghi ... le parole gli venivano meno, e a poco a poco tornava a ricorrere a gesti, a smorfie, a occhiate.” [“words were more useful than objects and gestures ... and yet when Polo began to talk about how life must be in those places ... words failed him, and little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances.”]⁶³ Calvino represents the alienating quality of language in a Wittgensteinian manner – Wittgenstein ends the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) with the proposition “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”⁶⁴ Calvino is enquiring about the relationship of language to reality. It seems that when language is employed to create that chessboard the game becomes chaotic and loses the meaningful structure that was projected onto it.

The same happens with the relationship between language and memory. Through language we can communicate past events, but because signs limit experience, those narratives turn to be always biased. This frustration underlines that even though signs refer to the world of objects the experiential truth always remains unreachable and it cannot be reduced to a chessboard without stressing its futility. This, again, unfolds a dialectical tension since language, an apparatus that

⁶² Calvino, *Le città 22; Invisible 22.*

⁶³ Calvino, *Le città 40; Invisible 39.*

⁶⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 2001) 89.

should make understanding easier, becomes an obstacle to communication. Spinicci affirms that this allegory supports the thesis that Calvino wants to activate the imagination of his readers:

Le pantomime di Marco, il loro costringere l'ascoltatore ad un *sforzo* immaginativo che dia un *sensò* alle allusioni e agli enigmi che vengono passo dopo passo create, divengono così la cifra della narrazione e della lettura, la forma che le distingue dalla determinatezza del resoconto e della sua comprensione.

Marco's pantomime, their forcing the listener to make an imaginative *effort* to give *meaning* to the allusions and puzzles that are gradually created, thus become the figure of storytelling and reading, the form that distinguishes them from the determination of the report and its understanding.⁶⁵

However, something else springs from this reflection that should be regarded as Calvino's best achievement in *Invisible Cities*, i.e. a redefinition of the relationship between the world of fiction and that of history.

We have seen that all the elements of the narrative are denaturalised and there is an undergoing dialectical tension between sign and reality. This self-referential treatment puts into evidence that also the historical setting of the book is an artificial construction where these deeper questions about literature and reality unfold. The engineered towns of *Invisible Cities*, therefore, are geographical abstractions that push forward not only the limits of fiction but also those of history. The structure of the novel, again, takes us back to one of Calvino's favourite sources of imagination, the Middle Ages, to Polo's famous *Il milione*. According to Ricciardi, the old travel book "is written in the credulous language of medieval wonderment at the marvellous, a happy or optimistic tone that Calvino perpetuates in his own text;"⁶⁶ but Ricciardi does not seem to note the frustrating tone entwined on the conversations between the Great Khan and Polo, and the sentiment of hollowness expressed by the emperor.⁶⁷ Some examples: "un senso come di vuoto che ci prende una sera" ["there is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at

⁶⁵ Spinicci 11. He also remarks the similarity between this pattern and that of *The Castle of Cross Destinities*, where a spell has deprived the characters from their voice, and thus from the immediate understanding of language. Those characters also make use of signs from the tarot cards in order to construct their stories.

⁶⁶ Ricciardi 1068.

⁶⁷ As Kathryn Hume notes, some readers of *Invisible Cities* "respond to its beauties and perfections, but several critics," amongst which I include myself, "find it also depressing due to the insurmountable void between the interlocutors in the communicative act, thus signs are never enough to communicate the experiential." Kathryn Hume, *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1992) 136.

evening”]⁶⁸; “pensò Kublai, non è altro che uno zodiac di fantasmi della mente.” [“Kublai thought, the empire is nothing but a zodiac of the mind’s phantasms.”]⁶⁹; “Kublai Kan ascoltava I resoconti di Marco Polo senza sollevare le ciglia. Erano le sere in cui vapore ipocondriaco gravava sul suo cuore.” [“Kublai Khan listened to Marco Polo’s tales without raising an eyebrow. These were evenings when a shadow of hypochondria weighted on his heart”]⁷⁰; “Kublai era arrivato all’operazione estrema: la conquista definitiva, di cui i multiformi tesori dell’impero non erano che involucri illusori, si riduceva a un tassello di legno piallato: il nulla...” [“Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire’s multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness...”]⁷¹ and “Dice: – Tutto è inutile, se l’ultimo approdo non può essere che la città infernale, ed è là in fondo che, in una spirale sempre più stretta, ci risucchia la corrente.” [“He said: ‘It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us.’”]⁷²

Another source of inspiration from the past is undoubtedly the most famous book of the Italian humanist Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decamerone* (1353). *The Decameron* is, in fact, a book that prompts a similar reflection upon writing. The story unfolds in Florence in 1348 as the Black Death menaces the city. In order to escape from the pest, a group of ten people gather in a secluded villa and spend ten days entertaining themselves with a hundred tales. During those days literature is used to construct a microcosm of fiction that has both a pedagogical and entertaining function. In a similar way, Polo’s and Kublai’s dialogues create a framework in the cornice of the palace from which the tales are represented. In *The Decameron* the “real history” allows fictional stories, whereas outside the villa there is the crude reality of the Black Death within the group fictional narratives unfold. This separation is quite different in *Invisible Cities*,

⁶⁸ Calvino, *Le città* 5; *Invisible* 5.

⁶⁹ Calvino, *Le città* 22; *Invisible* 19.

⁷⁰ Calvino, *Le città* 59; *Invisible* 59.

⁷¹ Calvino, *Le città* 123; *Invisible* 123.

⁷² Calvino, *Le città* 164-165; *Invisible* 165.

where the “real history” of Polo and Kublai is as fictional as the description of the cities. Spinicci remarks that they are “personaggi che appartengono ad un tempo e ad uno spazio tanto remoti da sembrare irreali quanto le città che Marco Polo dice di aver visitato” [“characters that pertain to such a remote time and a space that the cities that Marco Polo says that he has visited seem unreal”].⁷³ The passage from the conversation between the Venetian and the emperor to the description of the cities, therefore, is not ontological but also meta-fictional: one fiction refers to other fictions, somewhat reflecting upon the character of historic narrative, where also signs refer to other signs without never actually covering its subject.

The poetic descriptions of the cities, then, turn to the fantastic not to talk about the particular wonders of Polo’s travels, or not only to talk about those magical cities, but to disclose the endless possible versions that memory can produce, and accumulate those versions to the limits of exhaustion. The cities are factual, they are all true and they are all a lie; they might all refer to Venice – as Polo suggests at some point – or Paris because Paris is every city – as Calvino hints in his autobiographical notes –⁷⁴ and yet they have different names since approaching reality might be as complex and various as approaching memories. In *Invisible Cities* Calvino revisits books from the past to arrange his narrative, and he does it in a way that not only makes the reader reflect upon the function of fiction but also about history and the boundaries of the real and the imaginary. Traditions, like the cities, pile up in Calvino’s book and in their re-enactment we become conscious of their potentiality and mutability. The Italian experiments, therefore, are not invisible but quite the opposite: they are visibly directed to evidence those potentialities. Calvino states that “readings and lived experience are not two universes, but one.”⁷⁵ Similarly,

⁷³ Spinicci 13.

⁷⁴ Referring to his life in the French capital, Calvino writes: “My desk is a bit like an island: it could just as well be in some other country as here. And besides, cities are turning into one single city, a single endless city where the differences which once characterized each of them are disappearing. This idea, which runs through my book *Invisible Cities*, came to me from the way that many of us now live: we continually move from one airport to another, to enjoy a life that is almost identical no matter what city you find yourself in.” Calvino, *Hermit in Paris* (London: Penguin, 2003) 168-169.

⁷⁵ Calvino, Preface, *The Path to the Spider’s Nests*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (London: Penguin, 2009) 15-16.

fiction is as real as history – or history as fiction – as they contain each other, and experience discloses truth even, or precisely, when these narratives acquire self-referentiality.

3. Calvino's Engaged Disengagement

But how do we relate all these dialectical tensions in Calvino's narrative to his political engagement? How does this formal meta-fictional awareness, or allegory of the problematisation of communication, bring a reflection on the responsibilities of writing in Calvino's context? For the Italian writer metanarrative references have the main function of exposing the form of the writing so that a new form may be created. Nothing is given, no narrative is definitive but exponential to exhaustion. As De Lauretis remarks, "no code or system is given once and for all, no matter how established or accepted by tradition."⁷⁶ Calvino's engagement is not exactly pedagogical: the telling of the different cities does not have an instructive function as in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, neither do the tales have an entertaining purpose. In fact Kublai does not want to be entertained, he wants to know the real urban landscape of his empire in order to possess it, or possess it in order to know it. In a similar way, the reader is moved on through the narrative by this thirst of knowledge. However, the impossibility of completely embracing that reality keeps the reader in a permanent state of frustration, and this is what Calvino's work emphasises. This unattainability feeds Kublai's own frustrations, and it is the reason why he cannot help obsessing upon the possibility that everything is a product of the Venetian's imagination. In fact also the reader might feel an unsettling scepticism in the unfolding invention of inventions.

All these different factors might tell us something about the time the novel was written: probably that the context in which Calvino dwelled had become a complex web of interpretations, and in order to approach it he could pull various threads and stretch them but

⁷⁶ De Lauretis 421.

the truth remained ungraspable in its totality. In *Hermit in Paris* (2003) he stresses that “Paris has huge depth, so much behind it, so many meanings.”⁷⁷ Similarly, history has multiple versions, endless interpretations and after the European wars any radical ideology represented an end to the wonders of imagination. Calvino, although he is critical of the literary revolution of the American beatniks, was in many ways attuned to the “hippy” peace movement that sprouted in the States and rapidly spread through most of the Western world in the 1960s. He indeed gives all the power to imagination. The past cannot be expressed in its totality through words. The interpretations of that past are changing and unreliable, and we see this reflected on the figure of Polo – Calvino’s extra-diegetic narrator:

Tutto perché Marco Polo potesse spiegare o immaginare di spiegare o essere immaginato spiegare o riuscire finalmente a spiegare a se stesso che quello che lui cercava era sempre qualcosa davanti a sé, e anche se si trattava del passato era un passato che cambiava man mano egli avanzava nel suo viaggio, perché il passato del viaggiatore cambia a seconda dell’itinerario compiuto

All this so that Marco Polo could explain or imagine explaining or be imagined explaining or succeed finally in explaining to himself that what he sought was always something lying ahead, and even if it was a matter of the past it was a past that changed gradually as he advanced on his journey, because the traveller’s past changes according to the route he has followed.⁷⁸

We have studied that the revolutionary actions of May ’68 did not represent a trigger to action for Calvino, but he produced another manifestation of that endless structure that transmits an unmissable anxiety. His position was that of the *observateur*, a bit like Kublai in his palace listening to Polo’s digressions. Calvino was, as he later described, a hermit in the French capital experiencing the revolts at a distance. The author asserts:

My desk is a bit like an island: it could just as well be in some other country as here. And besides, cities are turning into one single city, a single endless city where the differences which once characterized each of them are disappearing. This idea, which runs through my book *Invisible Cities*, came to me from the way that many of us now live: we continually move from one airport to another, to enjoy a life that is almost identical no matter what city you find yourself in.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Calvino, *Hermit* 168.

⁷⁸ Calvino, *Le città* 26; *Invisible* 28.

⁷⁹ Calvino, *Hermit* 169.

Despite his apparent detachment, there is an undercurrent anxiety that also attunes with the times, when the search for “open” structures that would not encapsulate closed and deterministic totalities was a priority.

All the cities of *Invisible Cities* can be one city and yet they are all different thanks to the power of the imagination. The way we look at them changes our experience as it happens in the city of Dorothea, which the traveller has two ways of describing: through its external aspect or through subjective experience. Thus, the way we experience reality is always different and we should resist deterministic positions. The past is not something static like the city of Zora, forced to remain motionless because of its quality of “restare nella memoria punto per punto” [“remaining in your memory point by point.”]⁸⁰ Likewise, the language that we use to describe the past is always partial because history is like the city of Zaira, a city which is not a description but the “relazioni tra le misure del suo spazio e gli avvenimenti del suo passato; ... Ma la città non dice il suo passato, lo contiene come le linee d’una mano, scritto negli spigoli delle vie” [“relationships between the measurements of its space and the distance from the ground past; ... The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets”].⁸¹ The telling, therefore, acts as a negative mirror of that reality of which possession is simply not possible. When the Great Khan expresses his desire of possessing his empire, Marco Polo warns him of this impossibility:

– Il giorno in cui conoscerò tutti gli emblemi, – chiese a Marco, – riuscirò a possedere il mio impero, finalmente?

E il veneziano: – Sire, non lo credere: quell giorno sarai tu stesso emblema tra gli emblemi.

“On the day when I know all the emblems,” he asked Marco, “shall I be able to possess my empire, at last?”

And the Venetian answered: “Sire, do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Calvino, *Le città* 15; *Invisible* 15.

⁸¹ Calvino, *Le città* 10-11; *Invisible* 10-11.

⁸² Calvino, *Le città* 22; *Invisible* 22-23.

The structure, the content, the characters, the cities, all refer to a particular view that suggests Calvino is feeling a sort of historical anxiety against determinism, but also an equally historical exhaustion regarding *passé* experimentalisms. He used to be a Communist but that project – in which he deeply believed when he was younger – failed due to rigid interpretations, thus by the time he moved to Paris he was weary of supporting any closed ideology. Even the mathematical method that the complex discourse of *Invisible Cities* follows reminds us of the “method of exhaustion” proposed by Barth (firstly created by mathematician and astronomer Eudoxus of Cnidus and applied to integral calculus).⁸³ Claudio Milanese asserts that “Calvino scarta via via – come insufficienti – varie ipotesi conoscitive e classificatorie, procedendo di negazione in negazione e di approssimazione in approssimazione.” [“Calvino discards gradually – as insufficient – various assumptions and cognitive classifications, proceeding from negation to negation and approach to approach.”]⁸⁴

In his letters and biographical notes we have seen that Calvino expresses his political detachment without regret. The book itself, then, would be like an inverted mirror because its meta-fictional structure approaches the narrative to the real events and not otherwise. Things are better described at a distance, as Polo reflects: “Era al di là di quello schermo d’umori volatili che il suo sguardo voleva giungere: la forma delle cose si distingue meglio in lontananza.” [“It was beyond that screen of fickle humours that his gaze wished to arrive: the form of things can be discerned better at a distance.”]⁸⁵ For Calvino, the function of the writer is not to describe or include contemporary events in order to represent today’s world, but today’s world is already contained in the form of the novel; and today’s world is a world aware of its complexity, of the difficulty of a single solution for all, individualistic and convinced of its relativity.

Calvino’s interlocutory couple, the idealist (Polo) and the silent and melancholic old man (Khan), might even find their analogies in the young idealists (young Parisian students) and the

⁸³ Eudoxus of Cnidus was a Greek mathematician and astronomer, scholar of Plato, that developed the “method of exhaustion” in the late fifth century BC.

⁸⁴ Milanini 134.

⁸⁵ Calvino, *Le città* 99; *Invisible* 98.

old, melancholic Communist that experienced the defeat of an ideal (Calvino). In the end, when the Great Khan states that the inferno is their only possible future, Polo warns that it is not something that will be but is already among us and, besides, there are at least two ways to escape suffering it:

Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio.

The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.⁸⁶

Polo says that the first way to escape that inferno is by adjusting to it. Capitalism, then, might be the invisible inferno that we no longer see. The second way to escape is by being in constant vigilance. Indeed, this constant vigilance and apprehension is certainly Calvino's position in his literary project. As Wladimir Kryszynski puts it, for Calvino, "writing fiction as a metafiction means reusing pre-existing literary or discursive patterns in order to reach a new meaning and to convey a new message."⁸⁷ And: "metafiction may be described as a synthesis of *logos* and *techné*, that is to say as a reflexive and problematized thinking of literature and as an aesthetic praxis of literary discourse."⁸⁸ Conventionally we might think that a committed author of the left is recognised for being literally engaged with current affairs, with technological advances, consumerism of the masses and the struggle of the working class. In *Invisible Cities* Calvino, however, attempts to reconcile past and present, intellectual and popular, poetic and narrative, East and West, all with a characteristic political concern that is blended with them in an unprecedented manner. Even though the work might not be "visibly" engaged with the social developments of the time, we have seen that its 'visible' experimentation unfolds a tension

⁸⁶ Calvino, *Le città* 164; *Invisible* 165.

⁸⁷ Jorge J. E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer and Rodolphe Gasché, *Literary Philosophers. Borges, Calvino, Eco*, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 196.

⁸⁸ Gracia 198.

embedded in its form which, in its turn discloses a deeper conscious exercise, an engagement that responds to a social, political and cultural preoccupation.

In conclusion, in *Invisible Cities* Calvino continues to focus on the creative side of human activity, and the dialectical process that I have unfolded in this section reflects a historical and experiential awareness of the nature of society and his constant concern to revitalise its culture.

As Bolongaro asserts

Calvino would always come back to the notion that literature cannot forget history and its own conditions of production within a particular social and political situation. Literature can, and, implicitly, must take stock of the complexity of the real so that we can continue our struggle to *become human*.⁸⁹

Calvino's message can thus be best understood in the light of a new conceptualisation of experimentalism, one that distancing the narrative from the "real" contains, nonetheless, a political dimension that remains in tune with the ideological tensions of the post-'68 Parisian context. Calvino's is a narrative in which the writer is a reporter, and this does not mean a completely alienated and non-committed individual, but someone responsible that changes the way that we report that complexity.

⁸⁹ Bolongaro 194.

CHAPTER 6: A POETICS OF FAILURE IN *A MANUAL FOR MANUEL*

1. Cortázar's "desafío cordial"

In this chapter we will study how Cortázar moves away from the more formal and aesthetic experimentalisms of his preceding work to directly engage with the political upheavals of the moment, mostly in relation to the Cuban revolution, and re-discovers his Latin-American condition in the process. In 1973 he publishes *A Manual for Manuel*, a book that does not forget the experimental structure of "almanac" of Cortázar's earlier books, but this time form and content create a different type of convergence that evidences a literary and political commitment. In many ways this book represents a final synthesis of his earlier experimentalisms, i.e. between the literary fantastic of *Hopscotch*, *62: A Model Kit*, and his collection of short stories *Todos los fuegos el fuego* (1966) on the one hand, and the collage-books *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and *Último round* on the other. In this last chapter, therefore, I will examine whether this synthesis supersedes those earlier experimentalisms, primarily due to Cortázar's new and intensifying ideological commitment. This analysis is needed to understand why most critics have labelled *A Manual for Manuel* a "failure." Perhaps the failure was in the use of a *passé* experimentalism and Cortázar was experimenting with unknown territories for the first time.

According to the author, his entanglement with the Cuban revolution and the Latin American political situation triggered this new experimental direction in his writing:

Cuba, catalizador ... Me siento implicado, preocupado ... me siento por primera vez latinoamericano. Empiezo mi trabajo paralelo de escritor participante ... Mi camino de ficción no cambia. Escribo *62*, *Todos los fuegos el fuego*, llenos de fantástico; pero a la vez polemizo (*La vuelta*, *Último round*), ayudo a la lucha contra las dictaduras, Tribunal Russell, etc. Y hacia el año 1970 intento una *convergencia* (sin intención de sistematizarla): *Libro de Manuel*.

Cuba, catalyser ... I feel involved, concerned ... I feel Latin American for the first time. I begin my parallel work of a participant writer ... My path of fiction does not change. I write *62*, *All the Fires the Fire*, full of the fantastic; but at the same time I debate (*La vuelta*, *Último*

round), I help in the fight against dictatorships, Russell Tribunal, etc. And in about 1970 I try a *convergence* (without the intention of systematising it): *A Manual for Manuel*.¹

This “convergence,” as Cortázar puts it, is paramount for any reflections upon the new experimental phase that he was beginning. Firstly, therefore, I will examine Cortázar’s political moment – how his experimentation becomes entangled with the “real” events of the period for the first time – and, consequently, what differentiates *A Manual for Manuel* from his previous work.

Cortázar deepened his interest in Latin American politics and especially socialism after travelling to Cuba in 1963, when the Casa de las Américas invited him to become a member of its jury for a literary prize. In dialogue with the Argentine writer Francisco Urondo, he expresses:

Yo estaba instalado en mi vida europea con muy poca, prácticamente ninguna connotación de tipo ideológico o político con el socialismo, una cuestión de simpatía teórica nada más, la actitud típica del liberal que se imagina de izquierda. Entonces, cuando los cubanos me invitaron a ir como jurado del Premio de la Casa de las Américas, recuerdo muy bien la impresión que me hizo. Es curioso (una vez más debo apelar a la impresión poética): tuve la sensación de que golpeaban a mi puerta, una especie de *llamada*. Y Dios sabe que los cubanos hacían lo que han hecho siempre, es decir, llamar para un cierto trabajo a gente que suponen honesta, pero que no está necesariamente en su línea.

I was installed in my European life with very little, almost no ideological or political connotation with socialism, a matter of theoretical sympathy nothing else, the typical attitude of the liberal that thinks of himself a leftist. Then, when the Cubans invited me to go as jury of the Premio de la Casa de las Américas, I remember the impression it made me very well. It is funny (again I should appeal to the poetic impression): I had the feeling that they were knocking at my door, a sort of *calling*. And God knows that Cubans did what they have always done, i.e. to call for a certain job people they suppose honest, but is not necessarily in their line.²

Considering that the author talks about a “calling” and refers to Cuba as his road to Damascus: “Cuba ha sido mi camino de Damasco” [“Cuba has been my road to Damascus”], Ignacio Solares reads the visit to the island as a religious conversion.³ Indeed, after that visit, which coincided with the publication of *Hopscotch*, Cortázar launched a series of writings related to the

¹ Carolina Orloff, “La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos and *Último Round*: The Politics of Julio Cortázar’s Collage Books,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 90.2 (2013): 234 (my emphasis).

² Francisco Urondo, “Julio Cortázar: El escritor y sus armas políticas,” *Panorama* 187 (Buenos Aires, 24 November 1970): 44-50.

³ See the letter to Jean Thiercelin in Cortázar, *Cartas 1969-1976*, vol. 4 1225. For an insightful discussion on this conversion, see also Ignacio Solares, *Imagen de Julio Cortázar* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002) 96.

Cuban revolution, such as the short story “Reunión” (1965) dedicated to the Che Guevara; the poem “Poema a la memoria del Che” (1967) written in honour of his death; and “Policrítica a la hora de los chacales” (1971), which was inspired by the famous “caso Padilla” to which I will refer to shortly.

This road to Damascus, though, was especially widened in 1968 due to the uprising of what some expected to be the definitive revolution, when in France students and workers agreed to fight against the capitalist system in an unprecedented manner. Hence Cortázar, who had already developed a strong relationship with Cuban intellectuals and guerrillas such as Haydée Santamaría – guerrilla and politician founder of Casa de las Américas – the poet Roberto Fernández Retamar and the authors Carlos Franqui and José Lezama Lima, connected the Parisian revolt to the Cuban resistance. In fact May ’68 is when the Argentine author sizes the opportunity to extend his socialist ideals to the French milieu. In “La trompeta de Deyá” (1992) Vargas Llosa refers to this connection:

Se le vio entonces, en esos días tumultuosos, en las barricadas de París, repartiendo hojas volanderas de su invención, y confundido con los estudiantes que querían llevar “la imaginación al poder.” Tenía 54 años. Los dieciséis que le faltaba vivir sería el escritor comprometido con el socialismo, el defensor de Cuba y Nicaragua, el firmante de manifiestos y el *habitué* de congresos revolucionarios que fue hasta su muerte.

He was then seen, in those tumultuous days, on the Paris barricades, distributing flyers he had written, lost among the students who wanted to bring “power to imagination.” He was 54. Over the following sixteen years he would become the writer committed to socialism, the defender of Cuba and Nicaragua, the signatory of manifestoes and the *habitué* of revolutionary congresses until his death.⁴

In a symbolic act, during the uprisings Cortázar even occupied the pavilion of the Maison de l’Argentine [Argentine House] in the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, and Carlos Fuentes informs us that in the place where the first chapter of *Hopscotch* begins, in the rue de Seine at Quai de Conti, there was, at that time, a drawing by Julio Silva and a text by Cortázar that read: “Ustedes son las guerrillas contra la muerte climatizada que quieren vendernos con el

⁴ Mario Vargas Llosa, “La trompeta de Deyá” (1992), prologue, *Julio Cortázar. Cuentos completos*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1994) 21.

nombre de porvenir” [“You are the guerrillas against the acclimatised death that they want to sell us in name of the future”].⁵

It is in the midst of this global revolution that Cortázar began writing *A Manual for Manuel*. In a conversation with the Uruguayan journalist and author Omar Prego, he states: “Este libro fue escrito cuando los grupos guerrilleros estaban en plena acción. Yo había conocido personalmente a algunos de sus protagonistas aquí en París, y me había quedado aterrado por el sentido dramático, trágico, de su acción” [“This book was written when the guerrillas were in action. I had personally met some of the protagonists here in Paris, and I had felt terrified by the tragic, dramatic sense of their action”].⁶ Despite this active political experience, Cortázar also came to the realisation that the revolution of some of these Latin American guerrillas was not necessarily his own, and thus in the same commentary he adds: “Me di cuenta de que esa gente, con todos sus méritos, con todo su coraje y con toda la razón que tenían de llevar adelante su acción, si llegaban a cumplirla, si llegaban al final, la revolución que de ellos iba a salir no iba a ser *mi* Revolución.” [“I came into terms that those people, with all their merits, with their courage and with all the right to push their action forward, given that they had succeeded, given that they had reached the end, the revolution that would come out of it would not be *my* Revolution”]⁷ and concludes: “El *Libro de Manuel* es un desafío muy cordial” [“*A Manual for Manuel* is a very cordial challenge”].⁸

This and many other declarations that I gather in the following sections disclose this double movement since, on the one hand, Cortázar became a committed writer, but at the same time he remained critical of extremist positions and sceptical of certain “revolutions.” This is reflected in *A Manual for Manuel*, where we will see that he is not only committing himself to the Cuban case but also undertaking “his” own personal literary revolution. Indeed Cortázar became involved in a crucial political moment for Latin American history, but it remains to be analysed whether his

⁵ Carlos Fuentes, *Los 68. París, Praga, México* (Mexico City: Era, 1968) 38.

⁶ Omar Prego, *Julio Cortázar por Omar Prego* (Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce, 1990) 194.

⁷ Prego 194 (Cortázar’s emphasis).

⁸ Prego 194.

project was really “a cordial challenge” or, instead, signified a genuine incursion into a new field of experience that demands a different approach to his experimentalism.

My analysis contradicts the opinion of critics such as Ester Cédolas, who affirms that Cortázar was an a-critical political writer: “Cortázar no era autoritario ni tampoco un violento pero sí fue un neófito en política como tantos intelectuales de su época y se lanzó de manera a-crítica a dar respuestas a una demanda que ya había sido fuertemente cuestionada por la realidad y en el 73, casi invalidada.” [“Cortázar was not authoritarian or violent but he was a neophyte in politics like many other intellectuals of his time and he threw himself into it a-critically to give answers to a demand that had already been strongly questioned by reality, and in 1973 almost invalidated.”]⁹ When she says “a demand that had already been strongly questioned by reality,” Cédolas is probably referring to the reprisals that some Cuban intellectuals were suffering at the beginning of the 1970s, which represented the end of the Cuban dream for many. But Cortázar did not remain “a-critical” of these reprisals. On the contrary, there is a before and after the famous “caso Padilla” the consideration of which may be necessary to explain his reluctance to agree with certain revolutions.

Herberto Padilla was a Cuban poet and former supporter of the Cuban revolution who, after travelling to the Soviet Union, published *Fuera de juego* (1968), a book of poems that was considered “ideologically contrary” to the revolution by the head committee of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba. In 1971, after a poetry reading that he gave in the Union, he was jailed for “subversive activities” since his writing had not adjusted to the ideals pursued by his fellow revolutionaries. It was after that event that Cortázar, together with his friend Calvino and other renowned writers and intellectuals such as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Mario Vargas Llosa and many more, signed a letter against Padilla’s imprisonment. The letter, addressed to Fidel Castro, expresses their will that the government should stop repressing intellectuals and writers that oppose the regime. It

⁹ Estela Cédola, *Cortázar. El escritor y sus contextos* (Buenos Aires: Edicial, 1994) 26.

was published in *Le Monde* on the 9th of April 1971 and in *The New York Review of Books* a month later, on the 6th of May. On the 23rd Cortázar wrote a letter to Santamaría including his “Policrítica a la hora de los chacales” in which he attempted to explain that his signature against the “caso Padilla” did not comprise an abandonment of his revolutionary ideals. He insists that his *Policrítica*: “No es una carta, ni un ensayo, ni un documento político bien razonado; es lo que nace de mí en una hora muy amarga pero en la que hay sin embargo una plena confianza en muchas cosas, y sobre todo en la Revolución.” [“Not a letter, not an essay, nor a well-reasoned political document; it comes out of me at a very bitter time when I have, nonetheless, full confidence in many things, and especially in the Revolution.”]¹⁰ Also on May 23rd he writes a letter to Carlos Franqui explaining his reasons for not signing a second letter to Fidel, alleging that “a pesar de todo lo que tengo que objetar a la conducta cubana en el ‘caso Padilla y sus aledaños,’ sigo creyendo que la revolución cubana merece, en su esencia, una fidelidad que no excluya la crítica, una presencia siempre posible para colaborar al triunfo de su lado positivo” [“despite all I have to object to the Cuban conduct in the ‘Padilla and surrounding case,’ I still believe that the Cuban revolution deserves, in its essence, a fidelity that does not exclude criticism; an ever possible presence to assist the triumph of his positive side”].¹¹ Cortázar’s ideological position therefore engages with the Cuban revolution, though not at any cost because there is always something to improve on his critical understanding of the socialist struggle.

In an article published later, in 1976, entitled “Politics and the Intellectual in Latin America,” Cortázar admits that although he has always been consistently committed to the revolutionary cause he was never a connoisseur of political theory.¹² In fact the unfamiliarity that Cortázar had with the material is probably what prompted him to qualify his challenge of ‘cordial’, somehow evidencing a lack of confidence in the project. However, *A Manual for Manuel*, as we will see in the following sections, is a book that does not pretend to be “a manual” on political theory.

¹⁰ Cortázar, *Cartas 1969-1976*, vol. 4 215.

¹¹ Cortázar, *Cartas 1969-1976*, vol. 4 216.

¹² Cortázar, “Politics and the Intellectual in the Latin America,” *The Final Island. The Fiction of Julio Cortázar*, eds. Jaime Alazraki and Ivar Ivask (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976) 37.

Actually the English translation can be misleading for the title literally translates “The Book of Manuel.” Cortázar declares himself a writer of fiction, and thus in this new experiment in which he intermingles historical and fictional events, a dialectical tension about the boundaries of both history and fiction arises that might not be distant from my reflections on Calvino’s work. In the same article the author insists that he was not able to seclude himself and avoid what was happening around him, and thus *A Manual for Manuel* was his contribution to that reality:

If at one time one could be a great writer without participating in the immediate historical destiny of man, now one cannot write without that participation which is his responsibility and duty; and only those works which unite them, although they be purely imaginative, although they invent the infinite, playful gamut of which the poet and novelist are capable, only they will contain in some inexplicable way that trembling, that presence, that atmosphere which makes them recognizable and necessary, which awakens in the reader a feeling of contact and closeness.¹³

It is clear that his new project was an experiment that, regardless of the outcome, he believed necessary. Although he warns us that our expectations should not be too high because the challenge is “cordial” and has unforeseeable results, his merging of fictional writing with the factual writing of newspapers creates a synthesis that supersedes his preceding experimentation.

In an interview with Ernesto González Bermejo Cortázar again emphasises that when he “does politics” he “does not do literature:” “Cuando yo hago política, hago política y cuando hago literatura, hago literatura. Aún cuando hago literatura con contenido político – como el *Libro de Manuel*, estoy haciendo literatura. Lo que trato es, simplemente, de colocar el vehículo literario, no diré al servicio, sino en una dirección que creo que puede ser útil, políticamente.” [“When I do politics, I do politics and when I do literature, I do literature. Even when I do political literature – as *A Manual for Manuel*, I am doing literature. I simply try to place the literary vehicle, I won’t say in its service, but in a direction that I think could be useful politically. I think this is the case with *A Manual for Manuel*.”]¹⁴ When he says that he is doing literature, therefore, he wants to make clear that *A Manual for Manuel* is not a political book but a novel in which contemporary politics are involved. Cortázar wrote *A Manual for Manuel*, therefore, in a direction

¹³ Cortázar, “Politics 39.

¹⁴ Ernesto González Bermejo, *Conversaciones con Cortázar* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 1978) 124.

that can also be useful for us to understand what happens to his fiction when it becomes entangled with politics. We must think that Cortázar at this moment understood writing as a vehicle for the Cuban revolution in Europe. In a roundtable discussion on the duty of the Latin American intellectual he asserted that

no solamente se lee la obra del creador, sino que también llega el día en que se le exigen otras cosas, es decir que se espera de él otro género de “compromisos” ... lo que en general se le demanda es eso que se da en llamar “una obra revolucionaria.”

not only the creator’s work is read, but also the day comes when other things are required from him; when other sort of “commitments” are expected from him ... what is often asked of him is that which is likely to be called “revolutionary work.”¹⁵

A Manual for Manuel was certainly Cortázar’s most openly political engaged novel, but we will be left with the question of whether it turned out to be quite as revolutionary as he expected it to be.

2. New Politics / New Fiction

Before addressing the results of this new literary experimentation Cortázar was embarking upon, it is necessary to recapitulate the ways in which politics were already present in Cortázar’s preceding novels, thus *A Manual for Manuel* might be Cortázar’s most openly political work but his concerns began much earlier. Carolina Orloff, in her recent book *The Representation of the Political in Selected Writings of Julio Cortázar* (2013), rightly dismisses the general tendency to think that Cortázar did not show any interest in politics until his Cuban “awakening.” Taking his most famous novel *Hopscotch*, Orloff affirms that: “While, at least superficially, the novel [*Hopscotch*] is more concerned with aesthetic experimentation and philosophical questions than with political issues, this does not mean that there is nothing political about it.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Cortázar, *Viaje alrededor de una mesa* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Rayuela, 1970) 26.

¹⁶ Orloff, *The Representation of the Political in Selected Writings of Julio Cortázar* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013) 71.

In fact in *Papeles inesperados* (2009), Cortázar accepts that his political ideas were already posed in *Hopscotch*: “problemas considerados como capitales en *Rayuela* pasaron a ser para mí algunos de los muchos componentes de la problemática del *hombre Nuevo*” [“problems considered as capital in *Hopscotch* became for me some of the many components of the problematic of the *New man*; the proof, I think, is in *A Manual for Manuel*”].¹⁷ Already in *Hopscotch*, for instance, we find that the members of El Club de la Serpiente discuss contemporary political affairs such as the war in Algeria and the Paris Massacre of 1961. However, when the characters discuss the need to act upon those events and participate in the protests that were taking place in the streets of Paris, Oliveira states that his ultimate revolt includes the destruction of the same language that structures their discussions, and that inaction is thus the only possible action. For Oliveira revolution is comprised of the abandonment of the actual political and economical system, even its active opposition, because that opposition is already tolerated in the system and does not challenge the preservation of the status quo. Thus for the protagonist of *Hopscotch* the destruction of the establishment is just the first step – or hop on the hopscotch grid – towards the creation of heaven/utopia: the new man. As we have seen, following Graciela de Sola’s and Saúl Sosnowski’s studies on Cortázar’s conception of the new man, the Argentine author believed a total renewal of the values of rationalism was necessary. We have also seen how his project was related to that of Surrealism, according to which man needs to explore those regions that modernity had abandoned due to an enthroning of reason that had its origins in the Enlightenment. Indeed the Surrealist project involved a renovation of those values, however, their search seems to become too marginal for Cortázar’s ideals at this moment, and he redirects the struggle towards socialism.

A Manual for Manuel contains, then, the moment during which Cortázar’s preoccupation with the new man comes to the fore and when his project finally arrives at contextual and aesthetic realisation – the convergence that he was referring to in his notes. The main movement from

¹⁷ Cortázar, *Papeles inesperados* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2009) 173.

one novel to the other is thus from inaction to action: from an almost wilfully alienated position to a committed participation in historical events. Cortázar explains that he wrote “*Rayuela* para mí ... muy poco después, ese mismo individuo emergió de un mundo obstinadamente metafísico y estético, y sin renegar de él entró en una ruta de participación histórica, de apoyo a otras fuerzas que buscaban y buscan la liberación de América Latina.” [“*Hopscotch* for myself ... soon after, that same individual emerged in a world obstinately metaphysic and aesthetic, and without rebelling against it entered a route of historical participation, of support to other forces that were searching and search the freedom of Latin America.”]¹⁸ The characters of *Hopscotch* do not discuss a particular ideology but remain aware of the dangers that any closed and radical position entails. As Orloff suggests, “through Oliveira’s unwillingness to risk a given position, [Cortázar] presents a crucial socio-political dilemma which was central to the political processes of the 1960s, and which remains equally significant for the reader to consider whatever the historical present.”¹⁹

Also, in *62: A Model Kit* Cortázar discloses an alienation in the protagonists that suggests a non-conformist view and the defence of an alternative way of life as a creative protest against the establishment. We have seen in the second part that in this novel Cortázar also collects lines of action that start and end without any apparent particular reason – like when one of the characters, Marrast, replies to an advertisement posted by a society known as “Neurotics Anonymous” on a British newspaper, encouraging them to visit a minor painting at the Courtauld Art Museum of London. Marrast’s text causes what Boldy calls “an Ochsian provocation of chance.”²⁰ In the end such a flood of visitors to the “minor” painting leads to incomprehension, scandal and its final withdrawal by the museum authorities. We have seen that such almost surrealist, or Pataphysical, happenings in Cortázar’s novels are related to the writer’s experimentalism. Orloff also mentions that in *62: A Model Kit* the “revolutionary” group – in

¹⁸ Cortázar, *Papeles* 173.

¹⁹ Orloff, *The Representation* 70.

²⁰ Boldy 159.

inverted commas – “is a group based upon a seemingly utopian point of view, which relates to the more *avant-garde* aim of wanting to break with the tradition of a pre-established order.”²¹ As a matter of fact, *Último round* and *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* also aim to break with that pre-established order, turning the book into a blank surface where the author cuts and pastes what he finds interesting, randomly, or writes a poem followed by a critical piece because anything is possible. Therefore, it is not strange to find in these books comments about his other books like in *Último round*, for instance, where the author admits that *62: A Model Kit* was an “exploración de lo exploratorio, experimento de la experimentación” [“exploration in the exploratory, experiment in experimentation”].²² We must think, then, that *62: A Model Kit* is the experiment where he takes modernism to its ultimate extension.

Comparing the group of activists that we find in *A Manual for Manuel*, called the Screwery – in Spanish la Joda – to the precedent avant-garde non-conformist of *Hopscotch* and *62: A Model Kit*, we realise that the earlier groups are less active than the Screwery: “the groups in *Rayuela* as in *62* present themselves as bourgeois, aloof and decentred (typically avant-garde as Jean Franco would argue).”²³ The members of the Screwery have no past and we do not know their position in the workplace. Franco is right when she affirms that they are a “classless guerrilla group ... without past, without a basis in the workplace, [and] with no connection to other organizations,” but I do not arrive at the same conclusion when she ventures that “[b]ehind *A Manual for Manuel* is still the structure of the avant-garde and the belief that a few creative people can wreck the machine.”²⁴ Franco’s affirmation is arguable for if we follow the rather pessimistic reflections of the main character of the novel, Andrés, about the outcome of the political actions of the Screwery we realise that these “creative people” are not generally trusted to be able to “wreck the machine.” Andrés does not believe that the Screwery will change anything, and even “the one I told you” – a character to whose function I will refer in short – has serious doubts about the

²¹ Orloff, *The Representation* 125.

²² Cortázar, *Último round*, vol 1 260.

²³ Jean Franco, “Julio Cortázar: Utopia and Everyday Life,” *Inti* 10.11 (1979-1980): 115.

²⁴ Franco, “From Modernization to Resistance,” *Critical Passions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 303.

outcome of their actions, for given the unlikely scenario that they accomplish their objectives they would probably go on reproducing the same mistakes:

Ahí tenés a los muchachos, los estás viendo jugarse, y entonces qué; si llegan a salirse con la suya, y aquí vuelvo a extrapolar y me imagino la Grandísima Joda Definitiva, entonces pasará una vez más lo de siempre, endurecimiento ideológico, rigor mortis de la vida cotidiana, mojjigatería, no diga malas palabras compañero, burocracia del sexo y sexualidad a horario de la burocracia, todo tan sabido, viejo, todo tan inevitable aunque Marcos y Roland y Susana, aunque esa gente formidable que se ama y se desnuda y pelea parejito...

There you have the kids, you're watching them play, and then what; if they manage to do their thing, and here I extrapolate again and I'm imagining the Almighty Definitive Screwery, then the usual thing will happen one more time, ideological hardening, rigor mortis of daily life, prudery, don't use dirty words comrade, a bureaucracy of sex and sexuality on a bureaucratic timetable, all so well known, old man, all so inevitable although Marcos and Roland and Susana, although those formidable people who love each other and undress each other and fight altogether...²⁵

A Manual for Manuel, therefore, represents a break from Cortázar's previous experimentalisms.

My thesis is that with this novel Cortázar breaks apart from his re-enactment of avant-garde experimentation and produces a book that demands a certain, quick, and thus paradoxically more "avant-garde" writing from him.

But before expanding on the analysis of this significant shift it will prove fruitful to disentangle the different lines of action that converge in *A Manual for Manuel*. The critic Antonio Planells sees four: it narrates the story of the Screwery, a group of francophone Latin American activists whose main objective consists in kidnapping a policeman who is apparently in league with the CIA; the story of Andrés, an Argentine musician (who recalls *Hopscotch's* Oliveira) and his romantic relationships with Ludmilla and Francine; it dwells in the biography of Lonstein, an Argentine Jew, who makes up the "compact language" not far from the "giglico" of *Hopscotch*; and it is also a collection of newspaper articles, mostly about Latin American political insurrections, repression and torture, collected by Susana and Patricio for his child Manuel, so that the child will not forget the political and social events his parents witnessed, a history that

²⁵ Cortázar, *Libro de Manuel* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 1973) 213; *A Manual for Manuel*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 236.

they believe needs to be carried across generations.²⁶ Despite this segmentation of the narrative, Planells overlooks the importance of “the one I told you” – in Spanish “el que te dije” – a nameless character who reminds us of “my paedro” of 62, and whom Cortázar defines as “el/lo que escribe” [“the one who writes/what he writes”] in his notebook.²⁷ The one I told you represents then the writer – or assembler – as he collects notes for the book that will be placed before the reader – in the same way that Susana collects pieces of news for Manuel – and we may think that the notes of the one I told you include the fictional writing of Susana and Manuel in a metafictional way:

Por lo demás era como si el que te dije hubiera tenido la intención de narrar algunas cosas, puesto que había guardado una considerable cantidad de fichas y papelitos, esperando al parecer que terminaran por aglutinarse sin demasiada pérdida. ...había preferido proporcionar de entrada diversos datos que permitieran meterse desde ángulos variados en la breve pero tumultuosa historia de la Joda y en gentes como Marcos, Patricio, Ludmilla o yo (a quien el que te dije llamaba Andrés sin faltar a la verdad), esperando tal vez que esa información fragmentaria iluminara algún día la cocina interna de la Joda.

Otherwise, it was as if the one I told you had intended to recount some things, for he had gathered together a considerable amount of notes and clippings, waiting, it would seem, for them to end up all falling into place without too much loss. ... he preferred from the start to dole out diverse facts that would permit him entry from different angles into the brief but tumultuous history of the Screwery and people like Marcos, Patricio, Ludmilla, or me (whom the one I told you called Andrés without straying from the truth), hoping, perhaps, that that fragmentary information would someday shed light on the inner kitchen of the Screwery.²⁸

Even if the one I told you is given the role of the writer of *A Manual for Manuel*, the story is sometimes also narrated in the first person by Andrés, the main character of the novel, who Cortázar refers to as “yo” [“I”] in his notebook. They are both alter-egos of the author, and both follow Cortázar’s tendency to include different levels of fiction in his writing through characters who play different, dialogical roles. Whereas the one I told you actively collects notes in order to gather particular historical moments, Andrés is a well-off Argentine émigré in Paris who does not take part in the actions of the Screwery. At one moment the one I told you tells us that “hay

²⁶ Antonio Planells, “Del ‘ars masturbandi’ a la revolución: *Libro de Manuel* de Julio Cortázar,” *Cahiers du monde hispanique et luso-brésilien* 35.35 (1980): 43.

²⁷ This is found in Cortázar’s notebook, in his *Literary Manuscripts, 1943-1982*, I novels, box 4 (Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas at Austin).

²⁸ Cortázar, *Libro 15; A Manual* 6.

toneladas como Andrés, anclados en París o en el tango de su tiempo, en sus amores y sus estéticas y sus caquitas privadas, cultivando todavía una literatura llena de decoro y premios nacionales o municipales y becas Guggenheim” [“there are droves like Andrés, anchored in Paris or in the tango of their days, in their loves and their aesthetics and their private little turds, still cultivating a literature full of decorum and national or municipal prizes and Guggenheim Fellowships.”]²⁹ Picon Garfield agrees that Andrés is Cortázar’s alter-ego, finding himself between two worlds of “middle-class comfort and socialist commitment” and unable to fully embrace either.³⁰ Instead of middle-class comfort I would suggest *déclassé* alienation with Andrés because he struggles to adjust his intellectual life to the reality that surrounds him.³¹

On the other hand, it is true that he represents the critical Cortázar, the author who was unable to agree with certain revolutions. At one point Andrés finds the members of the Screwery infantile and irritating, believing that even if they achieved their objectives they would turn the revolution into something negative based on repression.³² In a conversation with Ludmilla, his Polish actress girlfriend, he expresses:

– ¿No estaremos, muchos de nosotros, queriendo romper los moldes burgueses a base de nostalgias igualmente burguesas? Cuando ves cómo una revolución no tarda en poner en marcha una máquina de represiones psicológicas o eróticas o estéticas que coincide casi simétricamente con la máquina supuestamente destruida en el plano político y práctico, te quedás pensando si no habrá que mirar de más cerca la mayoría de nuestras elecciones.

“Aren’t we, a lot of us, trying to break our bourgeois moulds with nostalgias that are just as bourgeois? When you see how a revolution doesn’t take long in setting in motion the machinery of psychological or erotic or aesthetic repression that almost symmetrically coincides with the machinery that has supposedly been destroyed on the political and practical level, you start wondering whether or not we shouldn’t take a closer look at most of our choices.”³³

This is an opinion that recalls Cortázar’s fears around the “caso Padilla.” In addition, Ludmilla gets involved with an active member of the Screwery, Marcos, as a result of the affair that

²⁹ Cortázar, *Libro 72; A Manual* 74.

³⁰ Picon Garfield, *Julio Cortázar* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975) 132.

³¹ Definition from Wiktionary: “Borrowing from French *déclassé*. Adj. Degraded from one’s social class.” Internet, 28 February 2015. Available: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/d%C3%A9class%C3%A9>

³² Cortázar, *A Manual* 147.

³³ Cortázar, *Libro 154; A Manual* 170-171.

Andrés is having with another woman, Francine. Andrés would like to keep an open relationship with Ludmilla but the tension between the couple becomes unbearable – which, again, could be read as criticism of the ideas of free love that were in vogue in the 1960s. The following excerpt is when Andrés communicates the necessity of becoming more involved with the Screwery despite his divergences with their line of action:

Por supuesto ni Ludmilla ni yo teníamos una idea clara de la tal Joda, apenas si sospechábamos lo que Lonstein hubiera llamado los epifentes o prolegomosos, pero había bastado que algo en mí sintiera la aproximación de Ludmilla a la Joda para que al mismo tiempo tanto macaneo abstracto se encarnara, un brusco «se acabó la diversión» que por contragolpe me cambiaba, me situaba de otra manera con respeto a Marcos y a los otros, sobre todo frente a Ludmilla que no tardaría en pagar los platos rotos, meterse en líos innominables con su inocencia polaca...

Of course neither Ludmilla nor I had a clear idea of the aforesaid Screwery, we only had a suspicion of what Lonstein would have called the epiphentents prolegomenists, but it had been enough for something in me to sense Ludmilla's drawing closer to the Screwery so that at the same time so much abstract foolishness should take on a body, a brusque "the fun is over," which as a counterpunch was changing me, placing me in a different position with respect to Marcos and the others, especially with respect to Ludmilla who would not take long to pay for the broken dishes, to get involved in the unnameable mixups with her Polish innocence...³⁴

As we see, he only becomes involved in the affairs of the Screwery when Ludmilla leaves him for Marcos, not because he genuinely becomes interested in their revolution but because he wants Ludmilla back.

The one I told you, trying to reconcile the disengaged Andrés with the unpredictable actions of the members of the Screwery, proposes a revolution that has an ideological basis; a rather utopian basis, but one that follows Cortázar's humanist ideals of the new man already debated in *Hopscotch*. The one I told you believes that the system needs to be renewed in order to found a new and more human man: "la realidad es un fracaso del hombre ... es una estafa y hay que cambiarla." ["reality is a failure for man ... is a fraud and we have to change it."]³⁵ but then adds that

[c]ambiar la realidad ... es aceptar que todos son (deberían ser) lo que yo, y de alguna manera fundar lo real como humanidad. Eso significa admitir la historia, es decir la carrera humana

³⁴ Cortázar, *Libro 147; A Manual* 163.

³⁵ Cortázar, *Libro 17; A Manual* 8.

por una pista falsa, una realidad aceptada hasta ahora como real y así nos va. Consecuencia: hay un solo deber y es encontrar la buena pista. Método, la revolución. Sí.

[t]o change reality ... is to accept the fact that everyone is (ought to be) what I am, and, in some way, to meld the real with mankind. That means admitting history, that is, the human race on a false course, a reality accepted until now as real, and away we go. Consequence: there's only one duty and that's to find the true course. Method: revolution. Yes.³⁶

There is, therefore, a strong dialectical tension between revolution as a necessity to set the foundations of the new man and real activism, which is a requirement for the undertaking of that revolution that entails a perilous overcome and extremist reactions. Andrés finds it impossible to engage with the active and revolutionary group, but that tension only reinforces his alienation, while the Screwery will end up screwing up their plans to change the world. Even if Cortázar sometimes also found it difficult to engage with the demands of the Cuban activists, he introduced his personal understanding of revolutionary poetics in his fictional representations. This shift, as we will see, involved a literary experimentation without precedent that was still connected with the experimental practices of Paris after 1968.

3. Experimental Results under Urgency

Towards the end of the 1950s the Situationist International (SI), connected by Asger Jorn – one of its founders – to 'Pataphysics, strove against the apolitical experimentation of Surrealism and stated that the first avant-gardes were no longer a meaningful option: "For us, surrealism has been only a beginning of a revolutionary experiment in culture, an experiment that almost immediately ground to a practical and theoretical halt. We have to go further. (...) If we are not surrealists, it is because surrealism *has become a total bore*."³⁷ In 1961, the Situationists published a manifesto in which they enumerated reasons for opposing the historical avant-garde, underlining the need for "new values" and accusing the avant-gardists of appearing "sealed-off from

³⁶ Cortázar, *Libro 17-18; A Manual* 9.

³⁷ "The Sound and the Fury" (June 1958), trans. Ken Knabb, online, *Situationist International Online*, Internet, 24 July 2014. Available: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/soundfury.html>

society.” In the manifesto, they state that the earlier avant-gardes must die and only their offspring should be saved: “European culture is a sick, pregnant, old hag who is going to die. Should we try to save the mother or the child? Some would try to rescue the mother, even if it meant killing the child.”³⁸ This call for action is, in fact, one of the demands of these artists that found historical validation during the French revolts of 1968. In one of the writings published in 1968, they confirm their prediction:

History offers few examples of a social movement with such depth of struggle as that which erupted in France in the spring of 1968. It offers none which so many commentators said was unforeseeable. Yet this explosion was one of the most foreseeable of all. The simple fact was that never had the knowledge and historical consciousness of a society been so mystified. The Situationists, for example, who had denounced and fought the ‘organization of appearances’ of the spectacular stage of commodity society, had for years very precisely foreseen the explosion and its consequences.³⁹

May ’68 was, then, for the Situationists the culmination of their objectives, when action met their aesthetic and ethical struggle. Similarly, Cortázar saw that his Cuban “awakening” became a reality in Europe after the French revolts, and I argued that his action resulted in *A Manual for Manuel*. But if I refer to the Situationists it is because, like Cortázar, they are heirs of the earlier European avant-gardes and because, as we have studied in preceding chapters, the Argentine author kept contact with some members of the group COBRA – which were also connected to Pataphysics in turn. Besides, the actions undertaken by the Situationists in the streets of Paris during May ’68 share some parallels with the first actions of the Screwery prior to the kidnapping. Gómez, for instance, is a character of *A Manual* who provokes troubling situations – or happenings – similar to those promulgated by the Situationists, such as when he wants to have a meal standing up in a bourgeois restaurant and refuses to sit down claiming that he should be free to do whatever he pleases given he pays for the food. When he is asked to leave the restaurant he protests: “So yo como de pie es porque vivo de pie desde el mes de mayo.” [“If

³⁸ Asger Jorn et al., “The Avant-garde is Undesirable” (January 1961), online, *Situationist International Online*, Internet, 8 August 2014. Available: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/undesirable.html>

³⁹ René Viénet, “The Return of the Social Revolution” (1968) *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movements*, trans. Loren Goldner and Paul Sieveking (New York: Autonomedia, 1992), online, *Situationist International Online*, Internet, 24 July 2014. Available: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/enrages.html>

I am eating on my feet it is because I have been living on my feet since the month of May.”⁴⁰

This is the main difference from Cortázar’s earlier books, thus these happenings suddenly achieve a definite political ideology, which finds validation in real historical events.

This validation, however, does not come at any price – at least for Cortázar who, as we have seen, does not sit comfortably with certain revolutions and their artistic representations. At the beginning of *A Manual* there is a reflection on Karl-Heinz Stockhausen’s *Prozession* (1967) that can help to illustrate Cortázar’s tension in regards to the involvement of art in society. In this chapter, Andrés reflects upon the reason why he cannot fully focus on Stockhausen’s piece; he does not understand why he gets distracted so easily when he listens to it. After thinking carefully he reaches the conclusion that the piano may be the cause of his lapses – in his musical piece *Prozession* Stockhausen employed electronic sounds combined with an acoustic piano – because it is an old and traditional sound that does not adjust to what he expects to be new. Andrés, then, from this experience deduces that the old man and the new man coexist in their contemporaneity in the same way that the new sounds coexist with the old, and that there is something strange about this coexistence. He laments that

a pesar de tantos años de música electrónica o aleatoria, de *free jazz* (adiós, adiós, melodía, y adiós también los viejos ritmos definidos, las formas cerradas, adiós sonatas, adiós músicas concertantes, adiós pelucas, atmósferas de los *tone poems*, adiós a lo previsible, adiós lo más querido de la costumbre), lo mismo el hombre viejo sigue vivo y se acuerda...

in spite of so many years of electronic or contingent music, of free jazz (good-by, good-by to melody, and good-by to old defined rhythm too, to closed forms, good-by to sonatas, good-by to chamber music, good-by to wigs, to the atmosphere of tone poems, good-by to the foreseeable, good-by to the dearest part of custom), all the same, the old man is still alive and remembers...⁴¹

According to Andrés, therefore, the old man is still alive and the instrument, the piano, is the bridge between past and future. In the end Andrés stipulates that there is the need to level the attention and “neutralizar la extorsión de esas irrupciones del pasado en la nueva manera humana de gozar de la música.” [“neutralizing of the extortion of those outbreaks from the past

⁴⁰ Cortázar, *Libro 65; A Manual* 65.

⁴¹ Cortázar, *Libro 28; A Manual* 20-21.

in the new human way of enjoying music.”⁴² He claims a synthesis that supersedes the understanding of old and new, thus “[u]n puente es un hombre cruzando un puente, che.” “[a] bridge is a man crossing a bridge, by God.”⁴³ We find a similar proposition in *Hopscotch* when Morelli writes: “no hay mensaje, hay mensajero y eso es el mensaje” [“there is no message, only messengers, and that is the message.”]⁴⁴ Man is the real message and the real bridge responsible for adjusting his attention. However, the problem suggested by this piece continues far into the book, when the one I told you picks up the subject of *Prozession* while trying to answer Gómez’s complaints about bourgeois music, which according to him includes electronic pieces like Stockhausen’s. The one I told you intervenes in the narration suggesting that Terry Riley is the perfect expression of what Gómez is asking for because he offers “el más inmediato, sencillo y eficaz que se le haya ocurrido a nadie desde Perotin o Gilles Binchois.” [“the most immediate, simple, and efficacious music that has occurred to anyone since Perotin or Gilles Binchois.”]⁴⁵ When Gómez grumbles that Riley’s music is idiotic, the one I told you defends its immediacy and Riley’s collaborative approach with the public as a necessary revolutionary element: “Será idiota, dice el que te dije, pero desde tu punto de vista revolucionario es una música que se acerca más que ninguna otra al pueblo puesto que él puede interpretarla, hay comunión y alegría y despatarro universal, se acabó lo de la orquesta y el público” [“It may be idiotic, the one I told you says, but from your revolutionary point of view it’s music that’s closer than any other to the people since they can interpret it, there’s communion and joy and universal merriment, the business of an orchestra and an audience is over”].⁴⁶ To which Gómez responds: “Pero eso no es arte” [“But that’s not art”] while the one I told you insists, “pero en todo caso es pueblo, y como bien dice Mao, en fin, vos verás.” [“but in any case it’s people, and as Mao says very well, you

⁴² Cortázar, *Libro 29; A Manual 21*.

⁴³ Cortázar, *Libro 30; A Manual 23*.

⁴⁴ Cortázar, *Rayuela 560; Hopscotch 397*.

⁴⁵ Cortázar, *Libro 92; A Manual 97*.

⁴⁶ Cortázar, *Libro 93; A Manual 98*.

can fill in the rest.”]⁴⁷ This tension between what is art and what is acceptable revolutionary material, which is the main theoretical concern of the Situationists, appears repeatedly in *A Manual for Manuel*, as we see.

Moreover, the urgency that the members of the Screwery demand from their actions was also similar to the Situationists. We see it, for instance, in the way they prompt Susanna to gather pieces of news fast and randomly: “Vos ponele las noticias como vengan, rezonga Heredia, al final el pibe aprenderá a sumar dos más dos, tampoco es cosa de darle las escaleras servidas, qué joder.” [“Put in the items just as they come, grumbles Heredia, the kid will end up learning how to add two plus two, and it won’t be a question of giving him a crutch, what the fuck.”]⁴⁸ There is no time to explain everything, nor is it worth passing on digested information. In fact the English translation of the title fails again to represent what *Libro de Manuel* really is, or what it is not, since it is not an organised and digested book that the reader can “consume” to acquire a particular skill. I insist that *A Manual for Manuel* is not “a manual” but a “book” that contains a forum for ideas in which a dialectical preoccupation with present and future generations is represented with an immediacy that is paramount to understand Cortázar’s new experimental phase.

Indeed, the pedagogical element is present throughout the book. The members of the Screwery, for instance, call a Chilean new arrival in Paris “silvestre” [“hick”], suggesting they need to give him “lo estamos adocrinando en el *environmen*” [“an indoctrination course in the environment”]⁴⁹ and introducing him to Europe explaining the difference between the Latin American and the European left: “Vos comprendés que traducir gauchistas por izquierdistas no te daría la idea precisa, porque en tu país y en el mío eso significa una cosa más bien distinta.” [“You have to understand that translating *gauchiste* by leftist wouldn’t give you the precise idea,

⁴⁷ Cortázar, *Libro* 93; *A Manual* 98.

⁴⁸ Cortázar, *Libro* 280; *A Manual* 308.

⁴⁹ Cortázar, *Libro* 24; *A Manual* 15-16.

because in your country and in mine it means something quite different.”⁵⁰ These instructions, however, are not just informative and pedagogical but inventive and even playful, and demand an effort from the reader; like the book Susanna is compiling for her son, which should recall a children’s book – though not an easy one:

Páginas para el libro de Manuel: gracias a sus amistades entre conmovidas y cachadoras, Susana va consiguiendo recortes que pega pedagógicamente, es decir alternando lo útil y lo agradable, de manera que cuando llegue el día Manuel lea el álbum con el mismo interés que Patricio y ella leían en su tiempo *El tesoro de la juventud* o el *Billiken*, pasando de la lección al juego sin demasiado traumatismo, aparte de que vaya a saber cuál es la lección y cuál el juego y cómo será el mundo de Manuel y qué carajo...

Pages for Manuel’s book: thanks to her friendships that lay somewhere between touching and mocking, Susana gets clippings that she pastes up pedagogically, that is, alternating the useful and the pleasant, so that when the day came Manuel would read the album with the same interest that Patricio and she in their time had read the children’s magazines *El tesoro de la juventud* and *Billiken*, going from lesson to game without too much trauma, except that who was to say which is the lesson and which is the game and what Manuel’s world will be like and what the hell...⁵¹

We realise as we read *A Manual for Manuel* that everything becomes part of this book. Even the climax, the kidnapping, becomes a part of it, to the extent that the fictional story turns into the real history – or the real history becomes the fictional story. The critic Juan Sasturain grasps this metafictional involution, and therefore affirms that the book “logra la síntesis buscada: la ficción sale en busca de la Historia y se identifica – se purifica – con ella.” [“achieves the searched for synthesis: fiction goes in search of History and it identifies itself – it purifies itself – with her.”]⁵² The truth inherent in the pieces of newspapers that Susana collects becomes, therefore, entangled with the actions of the Screwery until their actions themselves become news, i.e. “truth,” reaching the structural synthesis Cortázar was looking for.

This movement, in fact, suggests that truth, and especially social truth, can be represented in fiction in a different way than that favoured by realist writers. Cortázar was stressing the importance of finding this sort of representation when he affirmed that he was not doing politics

⁵⁰ Cortázar, *Libro 25; A Manual* 16.

⁵¹ Cortázar, *Libro 241; A Manual* 267.

⁵² Juan Sasturain, “En su cuarta novela Julio Cortázar nombra a la Historia pero no se atreve a tocarla,” *La Opinión* (10 May 1973): 18, online, *Archivo Cortázar*, CLRA Archivos, 7 August 2014. Available: <http://www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/crla/contenidos/Cortazar/fiche.php?Code=18.005&Cle=catalogue>

but literature, and literature that had nothing to do with realism: “no soy un escritor realista; no sé describir, sé inventar.” [“I am not a realist writer; I cannot describe, I invent.”]⁵³ In the interview with González Bermejo he states that *A Manual for Manuel* was thus the “tentativa de convergencia de un contenido actual, histórico, cotidiano en América Latina y, al mismo tiempo, manteniendo lo que yo puedo hacer en el plano de la literatura, sin sacrificar absolutamente nada.” [“an intent of converging an actual, historical, quotidian content in Latin America and, at the same time, maintaining what I can do on a literary level, sacrificing absolutely anything.”]⁵⁴ Due to the fact that the newspaper articles are interspersed with the fictional narrative, they generate an interesting dialogue between the factual and the fictionalised present, to the extent that the division between the order of fiction and the order of the referent becomes blurred. In the preface to *A Manual for Manuel* Cortázar has already warned us of this intention:

Por razones obvias habré sido el primero en descubrir que este libro no solamente no parece lo que quiere sino que con frecuencia parece lo que no quiere, y así los propugnadores de la realidad en la literatura lo van a encontrar más bien fantástico mientras que los encaramados en la literatura de ficción deplorarán su deliberado contubernio con la historia de nuestros días. ... Personalmente no lamento esta heterogeneidad que por suerte ha dejado de parecerme tal después de un largo proceso de convergencia; ... hoy y aquí las aguas se han juntado, pero su conciliación no ha tenido nada de fácil, como acaso lo muestre el confuso y atormentado itinerario de algún personaje. ... Por cosas así no sorprenderá la frecuente incorporación de noticias de la prensa, leídas a medida que el libro se iba haciendo: coincidencias y analogías estimulantes me llevaron desde el principio a aceptar una regla de juego harto simple, la de hacer participar a los personajes en esa lectura cotidiana de diarios latinoamericanos y franceses. Ingenuamente esperé que esa participación incidiera más abiertamente en las conductas; después fui viendo que el relato como tal no siempre aceptaba de lleno esas irrupciones aleatorias, que merecerían una experimentación más feliz que la mía.

For obvious reasons I am probably the first one to discover that this book not only doesn't seem to be what it wants to be, but that frequently it also seems to be what it doesn't want to be, and so proponents of reality in literature are going to find it rather fantastical while those under the influence of fiction will doubtless deplore its deliberate cohabitation with the history of our own times. ... Personally, I have no regrets concerning this heterogeneity which, fortunately, no longer seems to be such to me after so long a process of convergence; ... at this time and in this place these streams have merged, but their conciliation has not been easy in the least, as can be shown, perhaps, in the confused and tormented path of some character or other. ... Because of things like that, no one should be surprised by the frequent inclusion of news stories that were being read as the book was taking shape: stimulating coincidences and analogies caused me from the very start to accept a most simple rule of the game, having the characters take part in those daily readings of Latin American and French

⁵³ Bermejo 128.

⁵⁴ Bermejo 127.

newspapers. I was innocent enough to hope that such participation would influence their behaviours more openly; only later on did I begin to see that the story as such would not always fully accept those fortuitous intrusions, which really deserve a more felicitous experimentation than mine.⁵⁵

This is *A Manual for Manuel's* major achievement, to be able to synthesise history and fiction, blurring their false opposition. According to Cortázar the sort of socially engaged experimentation that he was undertaking at this point was new to him and the results were unpredictable, but he also emphasises the fact that he needed a certain order and that he was thus unable to assemble the book as “felicitously” as he thought he could. In fact *A Manual for Manuel* is not a purely collage book like *Último round* and *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* because it has a plot, and it is this fictional plot that asks him to follow an internal logic. Besides, this constraint could also spring from the realisation that random and automatic writing – both Surrealist practices – were not understood as literature *engagé* at the time when experimentation was required in order to create a new order; or at least taking a new direction.

Arriving at this point it is interesting to note, returning to Eco's openness, that *A Manual for Manuel's* criticism continues to dwell on that dialectical pendulum between openness and closure that the Italian author launched at the beginning of the 1960s. According to Jorge Ruffinelli the book has an open structure – like that of *Hopscotch* – with random pieces of newspapers cut and pasted along its lines, but the narrative unfolds a closed plot. Ruffinelli understands this as a negative aspect of the novel and finds the reason for this “failure” in the urgency under which *A Manual* was written: “la novela merece algunos reparos: su estructura ‘abierta’ – Cortázar confesó haberla escrito, en parte, según el azar de los acontecimientos cotidianos – la hace navegar indecisa durante las primeras cien páginas para, entonces sí, retomar una dirección decidida.” [“the novel deserves some objections: its ‘open’ structure – Cortázar confessed he wrote it, in part, following the random everyday events – makes it navigate indecisively during the first

⁵⁵ Cortázar, *Libro 11; A Manual* 3-4.

hundred pages, then yes, it retakes a decisive direction.”⁵⁶ However, another critic takes a step further assuming that this double movement “presenta la paradoja de poder ser ubicado dentro de lo que llamamos ‘obras abiertas’ pero simultáneamente – y en otro plano de significación – ofrecer una respuesta cerrada, controlada con la minucia a la que obliga la necesidad de no dar pasos en falso.” [“presents the paradox of being located within what we can call ‘open works’ but simultaneously – and onto another level of signification – provide a closed response, accurately controlled which requires the necessity of not taking any misstep.”]⁵⁷ Sasturain believes that the novel is an “open work” that “simultaneously” gives a closed and controlled answer due to its political engagement; however, he seems to overlook Eco’s understanding of the open work as a dialectical apparatus. According to Sasturain, the plot has a closed and self-explanatory structure, every breaking becomes justified and reintegrated in the order that Cortázar wants to supersede; he states that the breakings from the conventional novel “nunca dejan de ser descritas y justificadas, y cada apertura hacia lo desconocido aparece decodificada de inmediato y reintegrada a un nuevo orden antagónico del destruido, pero igualmente riguroso y coherente.” [“never cease to be described and justified, and each opening into the unknown appears immediately decoded and reintegrated into a new destroyed antagonistic order, but equally rigorous and coherent.”]⁵⁸ This is the synthesis Cortázar was aiming at with *A Manual for Manuel*, where his experimentation continued to display an inclusive openness.

What makes *A Manual for Manuel* new, or different, then? It certainly seems to be its immediacy and social involvement that situates the book on another level. The book, as Cortázar asserts in his preface, will deceive the revolutionary in search of realist literature as well as the aesthete in search of literary achievement. Indeed, despite Cortázar’s efforts to achieve that synthesis between the literary and the political, at times the order of the narrative uncovers a

⁵⁶ Jorge Ruffinelli, “Cortázar: la novela ingresa en la historia,” *Diario Marcha* (25 May 1973): 31, online, *Archivo Cortázar*, CLRA Archivos, Internet, 7 August 2014. Available : http://www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/crla/contenidos/Cortazar/image.php?Id_img=3581&Code=18.008

⁵⁷ Sasturain 18.

⁵⁸ Sasturain 18.

rather artificial plot that does not sit well with the idea of the merging of truth with fictional events. The actions of the Screwery, in particular, despite being revolutionary are rather imaginative and unreal. In fact, if *A Manual for Manuel*'s major achievement is its self-referential structure, it could be argued that it falls short in terms of the veracity of the characters and their actions. According to Héctor Manjarrez, these characters could in 1973 seem desirable and even possible because they were created to support Cortázar's ideological struggle, but nowadays, retrospectively, they seem distant and even derisory.⁵⁹ Thus, on the one hand, Cortázar does not satisfy the realist reader in search of a clear and straightforward commitment because his characters represent a mosaic of contradictory thoughts and opposed feelings, but it also deceives the reader who expects a fictional achievement because the narrative, due to the urgency in which it was written, falls short to create a believable setting for the reader.

In *Viaje alrededor de una mesa*, a piece that sprang from a debate held between the 20th and the 30th of April 1970 as a result of a demonstration entitled "América latina no oficial" ["Non official Latin America"] in the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, Cortázar criticised the sort of social realism that refused aspects of the human "en nombre de una cierta noción del *hombre nuevo* que, en mi opinión, no tendría mayor razón de advenir si estuviera condenado a leer lo que le ofrecen aquellos que obedecen a semejantes concepciones de una libertad revolucionaria." ["in name of a certain notion of the *new man* that, in my opinion, would have no major reason for becoming if they condemned me to read what the ones that obey similar conceptions of revolutionary freedom had to offer."]⁶⁰ In this debate he paradoxically condemned urgency and art conditioned by immediate necessity: "el error más grave que podríamos cometer en tanto que revolucionarios consistiría en querer condicionar una literatura o un arte a las necesidades inmediatas." ["as revolutionaries, the biggest mistake we could make

⁵⁹ Héctor Manjarrez, "La revolución y el escritor según Cortázar," *El camino de los sentimientos* (Mexico City: Era, 1990) 145-147.

⁶⁰ Cortázar, *Viaje* 29.

would consist of conditioning literature or art to immediate necessities.”⁶¹ Nonetheless, as we have seen *A Manual for Manuel* was published under just such urgency. But Cortázar contradicts himself only superficially, for in that roundtable he was referring only to the sort of urgency that produced social realist literature, and not the kind of experiment that he embarked upon with *A Manual for Manuel* which, like those of the Situationists, was looking for a new sort of art engagé. These new experimentalists were not striving against the institution of art for its links to the bourgeoisie (as, in fact, did the first avant-gardists), but for art assuming a social function.

Furthermore, Cortázar’s statements in *Viaje alrededor de una mesa* were made in 1970, before the “caso Padilla” and before the publication of *A Manual for Manuel*. Indeed, the book may well feel coloured by just the revolutionary excess that Cortázar was defending; he is a writer who needs to be “desmesuradamente revolucionario en la creación, y quizás pagar el precio de esa desmesura.” [“excessively revolutionary in creating, and perhaps pay the price of that excess.”]⁶² In the interview with González Bermejo he admits having to pay this price: “it is a book that has multiple limitations, among other things because it was written against the clock, trying that his launch had the maximum political effect.”⁶³ This urgency, however, if we read it from a historical perspective, does not need to be negative; Cédolas understands that there is “un extremo grado de asociación entre el concepto de revolución y la mitología de lo inmediato.” [“an extreme grade of association between the concept of revolution and the mythology of the immediate.”]⁶⁴ In fact, it may even be a vital ingredient for experiment and the opening of new directions in literature to come up with a formula that will not necessarily work or satisfy your readership. Urgency can certainly be negative but sometimes a lack of control allows chance into the creative process. Chance can affect the results of experiment and provoke a surprisingly positive outcome. Something we have seen Calvino also pins down in “Cybernetics and Ghosts” when he says that in the course of combining the elements of a story, the storyteller can have a sudden

⁶¹ Cortázar, *Viaje* 32.

⁶² Cortázar, *Viaje* 34.

⁶³ Bermejo 128.

⁶⁴ Cédola 21.

“flash of enlightenment;”⁶⁵ a winning combination that chance allows to emerge from the unconscious.

We have seen that Cortázar spent many years trying to finish *Hopscotch*; in *A Manual for Manuel*, however, the author wrote under that poignant urgency that did not let him arrange the novel with the same level of concentration. As a result of this, in *A Manual for Manuel* the limits of the fictionalised story blurred with those of history, and social realism acquired metafictional implications for the first time in Cortázar’s work. This was perhaps the challenge that Cortázar was referring to, and we should not forget that he qualified it as “cordial,” foreseeing that the results might not satisfy everyone, perhaps not even himself. On the 15th of June 1973, *Marcha* published Cortázar’s response to Ruffinelli’s critical review of *A Manual for Manuel* in which the author reaches a conclusion that would seem paramount to any reflections upon the new experimental phase that I am describing:

Pienso que un escritor debe renovarse, debe experimentar, aunque sus lectores se lo reprochen; esta vez, sin embargo, preferí volver a la atmósfera, al humor, a los esquemas personales de muchos momentos de *Rayuela* para así, eliminada una dificultad en mi trabajo, hacer frente con todas mis fuerzas disponibles a lo que había de nuevo en *Manuel*.

I think a writer should be renewed, should experiment, despite the reproach of his readers; this time, however, I preferred to go back to the atmosphere, the humour, and the personal schemes of many moments of *Hopscotch* thus, removing a difficulty in my work, I was able to face with all my available strength what was new in *Manuel*.⁶⁶

We have seen that *A Manual for Manuel* takes a lot from *Hopscotch*, mostly from its characters – Oliveira is Andrés, la Maga is Ludmilla, Morelli is the one I told you, and so on – and its structure, especially the form of collage, which is already present in *Hopscotch* but seriously developed in *A Manual for Manuel*. One could say that *Hopscotch* is the sample board and the rest is what is new, which is the dialogue that the characters of *A Manual for Manuel* undertake with the newspaper cut-ups, for it has a clear revolutionary intention. Blanco Arnejo stresses that the cut-ups offer a strong expressive force and quotes Safir, who in 1976 wrote that

⁶⁵ Calvino, “Cybernetics 23.

⁶⁶ “Carta de Julio Cortázar a Jorge Ruffinelli,” *Diario Marcha* (Montevideo, 15 June 1973), online, *Archivo Cortázar*, CLRA Archivos, Internet, 24 February 2015. Available: http://www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/crla/contenidos/Cortazar/image.php?Id_img=3844&Code=18.01

governmental transgressions are presented through a series of newspaper clippings; and these simple clippings which document transgression are *themselves* a form of transgression, since they physically and visually violate the novelistic space, while at the same time attacking the fictitious world with a violence which is real and present.⁶⁷

Political participation in no way imposes a limitation on the creative value of *A Manual for Manuel*; rather, its literary creation develops further within a context that includes the political situation that Cortázar was experiencing at the time. It is under that urgency that Cortázar wants to supersede his earlier experimentalisms and come up with what he understood as a new synthesis. *A Manual for Manuel* is, then, Cortázar's revolution; his own personal action amidst what is going on in his surroundings; a book that regardless of the qualitative achievement of that synthesis reflects a contemporary tension between the Cuban revolution and the 1968 European revolts, and thus represents a "real" experiment that most critics labelled a failure.

4. A Poetics of Failure

A Manual for Manuel pushed Cortázar out of his usual and thus more comfortable boundaries of experimentation – something that we can relate to the aesthetic revolution of the historical avant-gardes. Failure, although it may denote certain lack of control of the experiment, is incorporated in the everyday life of the experimentalist. Certainly, Cortázar's urgency for the publication of *A Manual for Manuel* can be read negatively due to that lack of control, but it is when that control failed that chance intervened in Cortázar's creative process. Chance has normally a negative repercussion on scientific experiment, but it has also proved to provoke striking discoveries. When it comes to literary experimentation and revolutionary poetics, likewise, urgency and chance do not have an immediate negative value. Failure is part of a historical moment, and its material representations not only hold a critical value but also expand on our understanding of the poetics of experimentalism.

⁶⁷ Maria Dolores Blanco Arnejo, *La novela lúdica experimental de Julio Cortázar* (Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 1996) 568.

In this final section, therefore, I will analyse *A Manual for Manuel*'s criticism in order to review the concept of "failure." Despite Cortázar's urgent experimentation, or precisely because of it, we have seen that *A Manual for Manuel* has been criticised and marked as a "failed operation."⁶⁸ Kessel Schwartz states that the book is an "absurd and wordy failure"⁶⁹ because it does not take you anywhere. Cédola, in turn, reads *A Manual for Manuel* as a failed experience that represents the conclusion of the avant-garde,⁷⁰ and announces that the only interest in the book is the testimony of that closure because "hoy puede interesar como condensación de la *cultura política* de la época y de su *encarnación literaria* al mismo tiempo que testimonia sobre el *ocaso de las vanguardias*." ["today it can be of interest as condensation of the *political culture* of the time and its *literary incarnation* at the same time that testifies about the *closure of the avant-gardes*."] ⁷¹ As I cited earlier, Manjarrez also agrees with the historical value of the novel but criticises the artificiality of its characters.

Indeed, for many May '68 represents the watershed that put an end to a certain understanding of the avant-garde but, as we have seen, the experimental artists and writers of the period – such as the members of the Situationists – were already striving to give a new social function to their practices and Cortázar was among these writers, busy trying to convey Latin American and European realities in an unprecedented manner. Some critics realise this potential and read Cortázar's new engagement as an achievement. Terry Peavler thinks that *A Manual for Manuel* "is a much better novel than critics have recognized. While it achieves the author's goals of making a strong political statement, it accomplishes this goal without making major aesthetic sacrifices."⁷² Boldy shares a similar opinion and defends the experimental value of *A Manual for Manuel*, affirming that it "was written quickly and was designed to reach a wide range of public. It is thus unfair to judge it exclusively according to the same purely literary criteria as his other

⁶⁸ Orloff, *The Representation* 153.

⁶⁹ Blanco Arnejo 235.

⁷⁰ Cédola 13.

⁷¹ Cédola 14 (Cédola's emphasis).

⁷² Blanco Arnejo 235.

novels, or in isolation from its context.”⁷³ He also states that it is “a brave and honest book, and is an important experiment within the political fiction which characterizes the seventies.”⁷⁴

Cortázar’s biographer Mario Golodoff also refers to Cortázar’s endless search as a writer:

Si hay algo que difícilmente se le podría reprochar alguna vez al escritor que fue Julio Cortázar es la comodidad intelectual, haberse estancado ... Por el contrario, fue un infatigable explorador y, en muchas ocasiones, lo fallido de los resultados (o lo juzgado como tal) se debió fundamentalmente a los desvíos que cometió frente a las expectativas que se tenían puestas en su obra, a sus deseos de iniciar siempre una nueva aventura.

If there is something that could hardly ever be reproached to the writer Julio Cortázar is the intellectual comfort, to have limited himself ... On the contrary, he was a tireless explorer and, in many occasions, the failing in results (or what was judged as such) was mainly due to errors he committed against expectations that were put into his work; to his desires to always start a new adventure.⁷⁵

Cortázar himself declared that revolutionary work is unfairly judged by critics that lack an understanding of the meaning of experiment because “toda obra ‘difícil’ por su carácter de avanzada, de experimento (¿y qué obra verdaderamente creadora no lo es?) no tarda en ser juzgada con arreglo a tres criterios que responden a la mentalidad típica de los críticos en cuestión” [“any ‘difficult’ work for its character of avant-garde, of experiment (and what truly creative work is not?) does not take long to be judged under three criteria that respond to the typical mentality of the critics in question”], which according to him are the following: “Se la puede acusar de apartarse de la revolución, de representar una recaída en las formas burguesas o de ser escapista.” [“It can be accused of distancing itself from the revolution, of representing a falling into bourgeoisie forms or being escapist.”]⁷⁶ Indeed, *A Manual for Manuel* was also accused of not being truly revolutionary because it was reproducing the same bourgeois forms it was trying to fight (see, for instance, Alfred Mac Adam’s and Ricardo Piglia’s opinions on the book)

⁷³ Boldy 161.

⁷⁴ Boldy 161.

⁷⁵ Mario Goloboff, *Julio Cortázar. La biografía* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1998) 187.

⁷⁶ Cortázar, *Viaje* 27-28.

but, again, these are interpretations that overlook the value of Cortázar's literary search given his contextual experience.⁷⁷

Near the outset of the work Andrés has a dream that provides a way to understand the message of *A Manual for Manuel* and its utopian content. In this chapter, that Santiago Juan Navarro reads as the self-referential centre of the novel, its dominant *mise en abyme*,⁷⁸ Andrés describes a recurrent and obsessive dream that could be extrapolated to Cortázar's search of a synthesis between aesthetics and politics. The dream, in addition, can be read as an analogy of the ultimate meaning of the novel. In this dream Andrés is at the cinema watching a film by Fritz Lang. In the room there are two screens and, despite Andrés's efforts to see the movie from various seats there is always something that stands between him and the screen. At some point he is invited by a waiter to follow him because there is a Cuban man who wants to see him. Andrés, then, gets into a room where this mysterious character is waiting but the scene cuts off at that precise moment. The next thing he remembers is that he left that room feeling he has an objective to accomplish and, back to the screen room, he perceives something strange. He feels like he is acting inside and outside the screen simultaneously. He is in the movie and a spectator at the same time. This dream, therefore, represents the unclear ideological position that Andrés (and Cortázar in turn) displays throughout the book, and which Cortázar also refers to in the preface. The two screens are the two possibilities he has in front of him – according to Navarro: “el compromiso del artista con el arte y su compromiso con la revolución y la historia.” [“the

⁷⁷ See conclusion in Gustavo Luis Carrera, *Nuevas viejas preguntas a Julio Cortázar* (Caracas: Facultad de Humanidades y Educación de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1978) 10. Piglia accuses Cortázar of producing a book full of socialist ideas that only reinforce the capitalist system. In his opinion *A Manual for Manuel* is not a revolutionary work because it turns a particular ideology against itself. He says: “En última instancia Cortázar utiliza la política, es decir, la pone a su Servicio, la consume como en otros textos suyos ... Esta apropiación privada de un discurso social se sostiene en un procedimiento de composición (en una ideología) que convierte al escritor – bricoleur, coleccionista – en el gran consumidor que maneja y devora – emparejándolos – todos los niveles de la realidad.” [“Ultimately Cortázar uses politics, i.e. puts it at his service, and consumes it like he does in other of his texts ... This private appropriation of a social discourse follows a proceeding of composition (an ideology) that turns the writer – bricoleur, collector – into the great consumer who directs and devours – flattening all levels of reality.”] “El socialismo de los consumidores: Nota final,” *Últimas Noticias* (Caracas, 24 August 1975): 29, online, *Archivo Cortázar*, CLRA Archivos, Internet, 20 February 2015. Available: http://www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/crla/contenidos/Cortazar/image.php?Id_img=3864&Code=18.033

⁷⁸ Santiago Juan Navarro, *Postmodernismo y metaficción historiográfica: una perspectiva interamericana* (Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2002) 180.

artist's engagement with art and his engagement with the revolution and history.”⁷⁹ The mysterious Cuban character probably represents Fidel Castro and, symbolically, it represents the influence that the Cuban Revolution had on Cortázar's life and work. The message that he gives to Andrés, however, is not revealed until the end of the novel, when the protagonist decides to join the Screwery in order to recover Ludmilla:

se me vislumbra la antena y reconstruyo la secuencia, miro al hombre que me mira desde el sillón hamacándose despacito, veo mi sueño como soñándolo por fin de versa y tan sencillo, tan idiota, tan claro, tan evidente, era tan perfectamente previsible que esta noche y aquí yo me acorara de golpe que el sueño consistía nada más que en eso, en el cubano que me miraba y me decía solamente una palabra: *Despertate*.

I catch a glimpse of the antenna and reconstruct the sequence, I look at the man who looks at me from the chair slowly rocking, I see my dream as if I'm finally dreaming it and so simple, so idiotic, so clear, so obvious, it was so perfectly foreseeable that tonight and here I should remember all of a sudden that the dream was nothing more than that, that the Cuban was looking at me and saying only two words to me: *Wake up*.⁸⁰

After Andrés is told to wake up, then, he suddenly finds himself playing a double role, that of protagonist and that of spectator. The dream, therefore, turns into an allegory of the utopian synthesis that Cortázar is seeking with the book. Cortázar wants an artistic and political engagement, and that places him in an uncomfortable position. He is neither sitting or acting, or doing both. In fact, the dream discloses “cómo esa síntesis utópica sólo puede llegar a conseguirse mediante una lectura crítica de la realidad.” [“how that utopian synthesis can only be achieved through a critical reading of reality.”]⁸¹ Cortázar also considers Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Bolivia and Argentina in his narrative. Most of the newspaper clippings collected by Susanna and commented by her friends are related to different Latin American dictatorships, guerrillas, political prisoners, military and civil uprisings, kidnappings and tortures. Cortázar uses *A Manual of Manuel* to pay particular attention to political instability in Argentina, especially that of Buenos Aires, the River Plate and the civil uprising that occurred in Córdoba in

⁷⁹ Navarro 181.

⁸⁰ Cortázar, *Libro 324*; *A Manual* 359.

⁸¹ Navarro 181.

May 1969, “el Cordobazo.” One of the characters, Patrizio, says he was present at the uprising⁸² – which, due to its popular and student-led nature, could be compared to the Paris uprising, which took place in May the previous year. Cortázar reports through Patrizio the human atrocities committed in his contemporary Argentina due to ideological beliefs. When talking to their Chilean friend, Patricio remembers the killings:

–Ya ves, chileno—dijo Patricio—. Y el tipo es ciudadano francés...
 –Bueno, de todas maneras no los matan como en Guatemala o en México.
 –O en Córdoba o Buenos Aires, ángel de amor, no le quites a mi país derechos inalienables.

“So you see, Chile boy,” Patricio said. “And the guy is a French citizen...
 “Vell, at least they don’t kill them the way they do in Guatemala or Mexico.
 “Or in Córdoba and Buenos Aires, angel of love, don’t take my country’s inalienable rights away from it.”⁸³

A Manual for Manuel is, therefore, Cortázar’s critical reading of the particular Latin American reality he was experiencing at the time of its publication. The end of the novel, which is again related to Cuba, reveals a particular outcome of his commitment with the revolution. One member of the Screwery dies in the confrontation with the police when trying to put their plans into action. We are not told the name of the body lying in the morgue. It could be that of Marcos, the revolutionary leader of the group; it could also be the one I told you, who plays the metafictional role of the writer, and usually conciliates extreme ideas among the characters of the novel; or, metaphorically, it could refer to Che, who dies in his fight to extend the Revolution abroad. Picon Garfield transcribes Cortázar’s thoughts about this ending:

When I reread the part about the corpse in the morgue, there are two references that made me think of something I hadn’t thought before when I was writing, something I see you haven’t thought either, that is the photograph of the dead Che Guevara that was distributed all over the world. The head, they say, just as I had written, was slightly raised and the eyes were not completely closed. And there’s a flicker of light that filters through the lids and Lonstein tells him, “look at me all you want, it’s all right.” There’s something in the description that is also Che.⁸⁴

⁸² Cortázar, *Libro 99*. The “Cordobazo” was an uprising against the military dictatorship of General Juan Carlos Onganía. It has been compared to the French May ’68 because students and workers associated themselves in the same fight against the military government, who had previously suspended the right to strike.

⁸³ Cortázar, *Libro 45-46*; *A Manual* 40.

⁸⁴ Picon Garfield, *Julio* 140.

Should not we think, then, that what was failing was precisely that romantic revolution lead by Che; a political endeavour that had a strong revolutionary force but fell short, particularly in France, of accomplishing its objectives. A dream that Cortázar followed to the end of his days but by 1973, after ‘el caso Padilla y sus aledaños’, he was questioning with his literary weapon.

Finally, *A Manual for Manuel* achieves the objective of being a testimony of its time for Manuel: the child that represents all of us, and the same child that the Situationists decided to save from their slaughtering of the avant-gardes. Manuel now can read that history and the struggle of its aesthetic representations with historical perspective. Cédolas quotes Liliana Heker’s defence of this subversive force: “Cortázar se pone de este lado, del lado de los que van a cambiar la historia. Es esto, en este venirse con todo que hay que rastrear el verdadero poder subversivo del libro.”⁸⁵ Cortázar’s ultimate search was, again, a humanist one, and experimentation was only the vehicle to pursue it. László Scholz, for instance, firmly states that Cortázar’s engagement is “ante todo humanista y socialista.”⁸⁶ Also Angela B. Dellepiane emphasises that his “posición política es la de un humanismo socialista, que rechaza, por igual, la alienación del capitalismo y la de la burocracia revolucionaria.”⁸⁷ Regarding the political message of *A Manual* I agree with Ruffinelli when he affirms that the book does not contain any conclusive definition but it consists “en la incitación a pensar por nosotros mismos.” [“an invitation to think for ourselves.”]⁸⁸ Cortázar’s search is an ethical search, and Manuel represents the young generation that has not died in which Cortázar had faith, and thus in the end Andrés affirms: “Manuel comprenderá ... Manuel comprenderá algún día.” [“Manuel will understand ... Manuel will understand some day.”]⁸⁹

⁸⁵ The note is from the inaugural issue of the magazine *Crisis*, quoted in Cédola 41-42.

⁸⁶ László Scholz, *El arte poética de Julio Cortázar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Castañeda, 1977) 63.

⁸⁷ Blanco Arnejo 244-245.

⁸⁸ Ruffinelli 31.

⁸⁹ Cortázar, *Libro* 353; *A Manual* 388.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I showed a shift in the conceptualisation of experimental writing. Through a comparative reading of the main works of Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino written in Paris between 1963 and 1973, I explored some manifestations of this new conceptualisation, at the same time as I unravelled their literary experience as foreign writers in the capital of the avant-gardes. I illustrated that Cortázar's and Calvino's experimental texts emerged from the compositional techniques of the historical and new avant-gardes, but that their individual approaches to writing were independent from any radical aesthetic groupings and manifestoes. We studied that their literary experiments could have a setting reminiscent of science-fiction, as in *Cosmicomics* and *Cronopios and Famas*, incorporate newspaper-diary collages, as in *A Manual for Manuel* or fantastic-travel-diary descriptions, as in *Invisible Cities*; they could emerge from an old folktale-like arrangement, as in *A Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *The Tavern of Crossed Destinies*, or be set in a cosmopolitan city as in *62: A Model Kit*, and they could even involve a narrative that resembles a complicated puzzle, turning the reader into an active collaborator, as in *Hopscotch* and *La fosse de Babel*. What these works have in common, however, is the self-reflective nature of their narratives; the calculated fragmentation of their structures and an openness that demands a reader to actively articulate the text. Eco's conceptualisation of the "open work" as a way of approaching this shift in representation showed the tensions that experimentalism of this period had with the past, in particular with High Modernism, and the fact that the degree of openness would always presuppose an active reader. Furthermore, we learned that these tensions are not (or not just) translated into formal manifestations that make their work experimental, but they constitute a contextual approach to the creative process after a change of paradigm, which turns the overall experience of writing and reading into a quest for a communicative process that wants to provoke a transformation of reality.

My study added to both Calvino and Cortázar scholarship on their 1960s and 1970s publications while living in Paris. I brought together for the first time existent critical work built around their experimental practices, and I uncovered a distinctive Parisian experience that places them in a different position from their contemporary French and Italian new avant-gardists. In fact, by relocating their writings and examining them under a new conceptualisation of experimentalism, I unveiled a new kind of writer, one who attempts to recuperate the vital experimentation of the historical avant-gardes, not in order to instigate a similar break with tradition but to reassemble that legacy and give new meaning to literary experiment. On another level my comparative study also disclosed how Calvino's and Cortázar's different styles shared a similar experimental approach, which leads me to conclude that their experimentalism shared a poetics and responded to a political choice. I shall now, by way of conclusion, briefly revisit Calvino's and Cortázar's reactions against realism and the new avant-garde, and the routes they followed after their immediately post-1968 publications.

In this thesis I illustrated how Calvino and Cortázar reacted similarly against an out-dated realism and a re-enacted avant-garde. We learned that by employing a series of experimental techniques that – to some degree – stem from and supersede the interdisciplinary and innovative approach inaugurated by Zola in *The Experimental Novel*, they reached a far different outcome to the determinism of the Naturalist writer: i.e. a form that potentiates the experience of reading and opens up new possibilities for the novel. In “Questioni sul realismo” (1957)¹, reflecting upon the project of the historical and new avant-gardes, Calvino writes that the historical avant-gardes failed to bring art back to society because their mysticism turned into an acquisition of fashion that “ha dovuto o cedere alla ragion politica, o ridursi al rango di *outsider*” [“has had to either give up to political reason, or shrink to the rank of outsider”].² Calvino was referring to the work of the new avant-gardist of the 1950s and 1960s, which should not be compared to that of their predecessors, essentially because “quello che prima era intervento volontaristico e intellettuale

¹ Calvino, “Questioni sul realismo,” *Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002) 20-25.

² Calvino, “Questioni 24.

ora è condizionamento storico *a priori*” [“what was first a voluntary and intellectual intervention is now historical conditioning *a priori*”].³ In fact, when reflecting upon Robbe-Grillet’s literary achievements, Calvino compares them to the writings of the 1910s-1930s avant-gardists and exclaims: “andiamo, non è più la stessa cosa” [“come on, it is not the same thing”].⁴ Cortázar, however, held some optimism towards the avant-gardes even though he did not feel committed to their cause either. In an interview with Walter Bruno, for instance, when Bruno asks him about the similitudes between his work and that of the new avant-gardists, he states that he is contemporary to the new avant-gardists and that he shares a “Zeitgeist”⁵ with them: “todos nosotros estamos participando en un cierto momento de la historia y es lógico que surjan determinados paralelos aunque individualmente no nos conozcamos.” [“we are all participating of a certain time in history and it is logical that some parallels arise, even though we do not know each other individually.”]⁶ But he does not consider himself one of them because he cannot even understand their work: “Tengo problemas de vocabulario, me resulta muy difícil el acceso a ese tipo de libros. De los libros de Philippe Sollers, por ejemplo, yo no entiendo nada.” [“I have problems with vocabulary, and I find it very difficult to access that kind of books. Of Philippe Sollers’s books, for instance, I do not understand anything at all.”]⁷ In Chapter 3 we studied how they articulate these answers in their fictional work.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that neither Cortázar nor Calvino position themselves within the avant-garde, in my thesis I claimed that they were still experimental writers, and this was only possible because the experimental – once an approach attached solely to the avant-gardes – had become an experimentalism: i.e. an individual choice that opened up the possibilities of writing and reading, which, at the same time lost force in communal ideological exchanges. Cortázar states: “hay experimentos, hay cosas que se me ocurren hacer a mí, que yo decido hacer, pero

³ Calvino, “Questioni 22.

⁴ Calvino, “Questioni 22.

⁵ Walter Bruno Berg and Julio Cortázar, “Entrevista con Julio Cortázar,” *Iberoamericana* (1977-2000) 14.2/3 (40/41) (1990): 137.

⁶ Bruno Berg 137.

⁷ Bruno Berg 136.

que no vienen de lecturas de las tendencias actuales. De eso estoy perfectamente seguro.” [“there are experiments, things that I make up, that I decide to do, but they do not come from readings of the current tendencies. I am absolutely sure about that.”]⁸ Calvino’s experimentalism was also a personal choice that did not involve his contemporary Italian avant-gardists; instead, he recovered literary structures from the past, mostly from folk tales and genre writing, and played a combinatorial game with them in order to blur the false limits imposed by tradition. We saw in Chapter 2, for instance, how he reinvents science fiction in *Cosmicomics*, and, in Chapter 5, how he rethinks the limits of historiography in *Invisible Cities* by shuffling elements from an old ontological level, the debris of a literary past, to create a Barthean un-alarming sense of exhaustion.

In “Questioni sul realismo” Calvino also writes that the battle of the historical avant-gardes against nineteenth-century realism brought a positive outcome, not because it brought art back to social life, but “perché ha allevato una generazione di suoi lettori dalla coscienza politica sempre desta” [“because it raised a political conscience in a generation of readers”]⁹ like himself and his friend Cortázar who, as readers of the historical avant-gardes, assimilate such political consciences and reflect them in the experimental approach to their writings. Most of the authors and critics whose work I examined in this thesis, including Poggioli, Bürger, Caesar, Eco and Calvino, agree that the new avant-garde shares the inherent “revolutionism” of the historical avant-gardes but this revolution “operates mechanically, turned against itself,” because “the revolution has already happened.”¹⁰ Thus the new avant-gardists are heirs of the artists and writers of the first quarter of the century, but, as latecomers, they are “condemned to repetition.”¹¹ Nonetheless, Calvino and Cortázar rather than wanting to create something genuinely “new” and “avant-gardist,” appealed to the educated reader in order to provoke a maieutic collaboration, one which they hoped would lead to social change and which shared the

⁸ Bruno Berg 136.

⁹ Calvino, “Questioni 24.

¹⁰ Caesar 33.

¹¹ Caesar 34.

particular *Zeitgeist* of the times they lived in. In my thesis I contended that their means were not radical but persuasive – not militant but resistant.

Furthermore, their experimentalisms, even though they could be read as formalistic, as for them literature was the material prone to be manipulated in order to create meaning, were far from dehumanising. As Alazraki stresses, Cortázar is interested in “la profunda significación que emana de ese estilo aparentemente deshumanizado” [“the profound meaning that emanates from that *apparently* dehumanised style”];¹² and Barengi, regarding Calvino’s work, asserts that “gli emblemi di Calvino – oggetti protesi volontaristicamente a veicolare un messaggio forzando significati e utilità consueti – sono la perfetta antitesi delle tante disanimate cose, refrattarie in apparenza a ogni senso” [“the emblems of Calvino – objects voluntarily leant to carry a message forcing usual meanings and utilities – are the perfect antithesis to all the unanimated things, averse to meaning in appearance”].¹³ These comments point up Calvino’s and Cortázar’s humanising experimentalism, since they are experimentalists that animate things, and generate a deeper meaning through their style and compositional techniques. Calvino, on the one hand, wanted to create a synthesis between two different ontological levels, as he declared himself favourable to an “autobiografismo dell’uomo della società vecchia e d’uno dell’uomo della società nuova” [“autobiography of the man of the old society and one of the man of the new society”].¹⁴ For him, even though the contemporary writer had lost that revolutionary force, the poetics of the experimentalist could still involve a search for meaning through form. These formal searches, in fact, lead to the literary sense of exhaustion that Barth sharply articulated in the mid-sixties, before he became a theorist of Postmodernity. Cortázar, on the other hand, never abandoned Che Guevara’s revolutionary belief in the new man, which he connected with the Surrealist quest for a regeneration of mankind. However, we saw that in his fiction, as well as in his critical work and interviews, when he argues for this renovation he often employs irony

¹² Alazraki, *Hacia* 200 (my emphasis).

¹³ Barengi 52.

¹⁴ Calvino, “Questioni 25.

and scepticism. In Chapter 6 we have seen that in *A Manual for Manuel*, for instance, “el que te dije” affirms that he is not “escribiendo osado ni liberado ni otras pajarías por el estilo” [“writing with daring or freely or like any other kind of jerking off like that”] because he is “estoy queriendo hombre” [“looking for a man.”]¹⁵ This character, who adopts the role of writer, is admitting that he is a seeker for something deeper than stylistic fireworks, since he wants to break with the established hierarchy of the system; but he also illustrates how the main character, Andrés, is “cultivando todavía una literatura llena de decoro y premios nacionales o municipales y becas Guggenheim” [“still cultivating a literature full of decorum and national or municipal prizes and Guggenheim Fellowships.”]¹⁶

Calvino and Cortázar are writers who find themselves in a similar place at a similar time, in the capital of the avant-gardes, Paris, debating their stylistic experiments with the Parisian *mode* of the period. We studied in Chapter 3 that both reflect upon Robbe-Grillet’s ideas, and that dialogue sometimes even penetrates their fiction. Their approaches, nonetheless, set them apart from any new avant-gardism, and bring them together as foreign experimental writers in Paris concerned with a more ludic, playful and sometimes even sceptical writing. In Chapter 4, I identified how in *La fosse de Babel*, for example, these tensions cohabit. Various experimentalisms, like that of the group COBRA and the Oulipo converge in this, the only published collaborative work between Calvino and Cortázar. It is interesting how COBRA’s spontaneity, for instance, clashes with Oulipian exactness. COBRA conveyed a social message that the French Oulipo, in fact, had apparently forgotten. For the COBRA artists, art and life was one and “there was no point to the Surrealistic experiment unless it was developed based on dialectical materialism.”¹⁷ We learned that precisely this Oulipian lack of social involvement explains Cortázar’s lack of interest in their workshops. Furthermore, it is at this point that Calvino and Cortázar take

¹⁵ Cortázar, *Libro 212*; *A Manual* 234.

¹⁶ Cortázar, *Libro 72*; *A Manual* 74.

¹⁷ Stokvis 147.

separate routes, for Cortázar became a convinced socialist and Calvino finally agreed to become a member of the Oulipo.

Cortázar shared a time and a place with Calvino, but in Chapter 6 we studied that with *A Manual for Manuel* their interests shifted and their writing experiments undertook new routes. In the early 1970s, Cortázar rearticulates his experimentalism to adjust it to new social and political imperatives, triggered by his commitment to the new Latin American left. In fact, this raises an interesting field of research, because in the 1970s Cortázar's commitment to Latin American politics might have triggered a reactivation of the European historical avant-gardes in his writing of *A Manual for Manuel*; though we might also ask whether the emergence of this new political map marked the final rift from his European cultural influence. In my thesis, however, I tried to discern the politics of Cortázar's experimentalism. If we take, for instance, Calinescu's understanding of revolution when he says that "[r]evolution is distinguished from any form of spontaneous or even conscious rebellion because it implies, besides the essential moment of negation or rejection, a specific consciousness of time and an alliance with it,"¹⁸ we realise that Cortázar always thought in this way and responded to historical events throughout his work. In *Nuevas viejas preguntas a Julio Cortázar* (1978) he offers an arresting answer to Mac Adam's accusation of not having been a truly revolutionary author:

Lo que me gustaría saber es qué entiende [critic Mac Adam] por eso de que yo nunca he sido un escritor revolucionario en el sentido literario de la palabra, porque si bien no pretendo haber hecho nada trascendental, se me ocurre de todas maneras que *mis libros han sido siempre experimentales, en el sentido literario*, como dice Mac Adam, y *¿qué es lo experimental si no lo revolucionario en una perspectiva histórica?*

What I would like to know is what does [Mac Adam] understand about me not being a revolutionary writer in the literal sense of the word, because although I do not claim to have done anything transcendental, it occurs to me that *my books have always been experimental, in the literary sense*, as Mac Adam says, and *what is experimental if not the revolutionary in a historical perspective?*¹⁹

Although historical hindsight tells us that not every type of experimental writing is necessarily revolutionary – take, for instance, the strategies of contemporary Oulipian writers, who find

¹⁸ Calinescu 22.

¹⁹ Carreras 11 (my emphasis).

themselves dedicated almost exclusively to a limitedly formal experimentation – in the early 1970s Cortázar strongly believed that his oeuvre was revolutionary simply because it was experimental. Perhaps in *A Manual for Manuel* he discloses a rather utopian search for a convergence between what he calls the fantastic and the political; perhaps that differentiation was no longer possible and thus the fictional had already become political. Nonetheless, his search evidences a social preoccupation anchored in the experimental hopes of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Calvino, in “In memoria di Julio Cortázar” dedicates a few pages to Cortázar in which he explains that their friendship preceded this intense political period of Cortázar’s life:

Di tutta questa parte della sua vita e attività e degli scritti che l’hanno accompagnata, so poco. La mia amicizia con lui si situa nel periodo precedente a questa fase; sono però sicuro che se la determinazione del militante gli faceva dire e scrivere anche cose in cui il suo accento era poco riconoscibile, la sua buona fede, il suo disinteresse, la sua modestia sono fuori discussione.

Of all this part of his life and activities and the writings that accompanied it, I know little. My friendship with him dates from the period prior to this stage; I am sure, though, that the determination of the militant made him say and write things in which his style was barely recognisable, although his good faith, his selflessness and his modesty were out of the question.²⁰

As we learned, Calvino’s favourite Cortázar is to be found in his *Cronopios and Famas*, where “l’agilità della sua immaginazione ottiene risultati straordinariamente felici.” [“the agility of his imagination has extraordinarily felicitous results.”]²¹ We know that Calvino also signed the letter with Cortázar complaining against “el caso Padilla,” and thus he could not understand why his friend pressed on his political engagement with Cuba after that letter was rejected.

For experimental writers, according to Calvino: “There are no safe territories. The work itself is and has to be a battleground.”²² This is Calvino’s revolutionary approach to writing, one that he never loses. He was seeking new ways to represent human nature, as much so as Cortázar, and if we were to follow Calinescu’s understanding of revolution, we might think that his work is

²⁰ *Saggi*, vol. 1 1308. Previously published as “L’uomo che lottò con una scala,” in *La Repubblica* (14 February 1984).

²¹ Calvino, Preface back cover.

²² Calvino, “Whom do we Write for?” *The Uses* 88.

also revolutionary. Yet Calvino's goal was not as utopian as Cortázar's since his literature was always more technical and precise than his friend's more visceral and baroque style. We saw that this turning point, in fact, illustrates a crucial difference between the two authors at this time, which is the political urgency, or lack of it, in their writing. Cortázar displays an unprecedented urgency in *A Manual for Manuel* that Calvino never seemed to experience. Thanks to the testimony Calvino left to Varese, for instance, we know that the book of *Invisible Cities* was slowly assembled "piecemeal, through a successive juxtaposition of separate pieces" that then came together and formed "convergent or divergent discourses."²³ We know, on the other hand, that Cortázar wrote *A Manual for Manuel* under the pressure of the Cuban turmoil.

Despite these differences, however, we can still find similarities between their writings. Calvino's and Cortázar's structuring strategies, for instance, shared certain aspects and mirrored one another's. The reader is expected to read *Invisible Cities* randomly, in a similar fashion to Cortázar's *Hopscotch*. Calvino says: "I think [chapters] must be read one by one because that was how they came into being, and then each should be read in the various series that the book suggests."²⁴ At the same time, although *A Manual for Manuel* is structurally different from *Invisible Cities*, a similar sense of accumulation springs from both books. Calvino writes that *Invisible Cities* came in the end "on the basis of the material I had accumulated"²⁵ and we studied that Cortázar's book for Manuel is mostly formed of accumulated material – mainly extracts from contemporary news stories – that he then sets into dialogue with his fiction. The book is, in fact, supposed to be a gathering of various sources that stand in place of its absent central character Manuel. This sense of accumulation, whether fictional or otherwise, takes us once more back to Eco's openness and Barth's literature of exhaustion, which I placed at the centre of my analysis of Cortázar's and Calvino's aesthetics. Although Calvino assumed the position of the Great Khan and Cortázar found himself in revolutionary chaos, these were not necessarily two

²³ Calvino, *Letters* 426.

²⁴ See the dialogue between Varese and Calvino in *Letters* 425-426.

²⁵ Calvino, *Letters* 426.

completely opposite poles. On the contrary, Cortázar never lost the perspective of the critical spectator and Calvino was not just an outsider, “more than that, his books come from a particular observer at a particular time, and many of them are secret polemics about the political life of the time, reflections of and on his age.”²⁶ Thus even in their less comparable phases, we can still identify an experimentalism that unites their literatures.

In Paris, Calvino and Cortázar both envisaged a culturally and critically literate mass-readership ready to receive their work, an aspiration that had not been possible at the turn of the century as the first avant-gardes emerged. Calvino insists that the revolutionary discourse had to be undertaken differently, in accordance with their period. As far as he is concerned, literature has to realise “how modest is its impact on politics.”²⁷ Thus, he writes that

[t]he effect that an important book, literary or scientific, can have on the general struggle in progress is to raise it to a higher level of awareness, to add to its instruments of knowledge, of foresight, of imagination, of concentration, etc. The new level may be more favourable either to revolution or to reaction [...]. It is not so much the book that is politically revolutionary as the use that can be made of it; even a work intended to be politically revolutionary does not become so except in the course of being used, in its often retarded and indirect effects.²⁸

This preoccupation with the *use* to which literature can be put suggests that Calvino, as well as Cortázar, was an engaged writer, insofar as his ultimate intention was to involve the reader in the creation of structures that were not given, but “open” and “usable.” In 1967, in an article entitled “Lo scaffale ipotetico” [“Whom do we Write for?” (1986)], Calvino writes:

The reader that we have to foresee for our books will have epistemological, semantic, practical, and methodological requirements which he will constantly want to compare, even on the level of literature, as being examples of symbolic procedures and the construction of logical patterns. I speak also, and perhaps chiefly, of the *political* reader.²⁹

These types of declarations demonstrate that Calvino links the contemporary cultural and political reader to a literary renaissance. He was writing at a time when literature had become affordable to many consumers. Thus, for him, the writer was right to expect a prepared public

²⁶ Philip Hensher, “Missing you already. Italo Calvino’s rich memoirs, *Hermit in Paris*, have one fault – he isn’t interested in himself,” online, *The Observer* (London, 9 February 2003), Internet, 26 September 2014. Available: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/feb/09/biography.fiction>

²⁷ Calvino, “Whom do we 87.

²⁸ Calvino, “Whom do we 87.

²⁹ Calvino, “Whom do we 84-85 (Calvino’s emphasis).

that was even “*more cultured than the writer himself.*”³⁰ Cortázar’s works were likewise read by a broad international readership and his efforts were also directed towards the new, active reader, to the extent that reaching this public turned into the social function of his writing. It cannot be denied that they were both products of the consumer society of late capitalism in which they existed, and the “anti-capitalist” revolution that bloomed in the streets of Paris was, of course, quickly reabsorbed by the system. Similarly, revolutionary literature also began to be seen as a product of the system that allowed its reproduction. Calvino realised that the capitalist system quickly absorbs and neutralises revolutionary writing (remember how he describes the American beatniks).³¹ But for Cortázar that revolution took him back to Cuba, where he debated the position of the intellectual in the new political cartography of Latin America.

In 1974 Cortázar received the Prix Médicis Étranger for *A Manual for Manuel* and decided to donate the money to the Chilean revolution. In Carrera’s interview Cortázar explains that his concern, since the 11th of September 1973 (date of the Chilean’s coup d’état and the same year in which he published *A Manual for Manuel*) was orientated towards the Chilean struggle against the military junta. In his political involvement Cortázar not only took an active participation in “el caso Padilla” and wrote various political fictions, but after *A Manual for Manuel*, despite the criticism that he received, continued to work for his ideals, distrusting both easy and extremist positions. Thus his search continued through short stories such as “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” (1977) [“Apocalypse at Solentiname”] and “Recortes de Prensa” (1981) [“Press Clippings”], for instance, which evidence a perseverance regarding his concerns with the nature of fiction and reality, authority and authorship, and with the writer’s responsibilities and the role they must develop in the power relationships that operate within literary texts.

Calvino, in turn, would, in his most famous book *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (1979) [*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1981)], continue to dwell on the literature of exhaustion, experimenting with endless metafictional levels, which, as we have seen, are political even though they do not

³⁰ Calvino, “Whom do we 85 (Calvino’s emphasis).

³¹ Calvino, “L’antitesi 126-127.

move into political action. Thus deep into the decade of the 1970s, Calvino's narrative moves more toward what Linda Hutcheon defines as "de-naturalising critique."³² Hutcheon reads that Calvino's experimental writings have indeed a political dimension because his exploration of form is the kind that "is inextricably bound up with a critique of domination."³³ Hutcheon writes in the 1980s, however, by which time the theoretical scaffolding of postmodernism has underpinned its narrative building and the experimental (linked to the aesthetic of the postmodern) has acquired a new political dimension. As postmodernist critic David E. Wellbery puts it: "Postmodern aesthetic experimentation should be viewed as having an irreducible political dimension. It is inextricably bound up with a critique of domination."³⁴ Calvino's postmodern self-reflectivity and parody, then, although in a different direction to that of Cortázar, also meets historical actuality. Whereas Cortázar was publicly struggling for a new and socialist Latin America, Calvino had a rather pessimistic view on actual revolution in contemporary Western capitalism. However, my argument was that their literature is revolutionary and pushes generic boundaries in both cases.

In this new "chaosmos," Calvino and Cortázar display an identifiable way of dealing with literary experiment. They are not experimenting in a completely unknown field, and they do not want to persuade us of any ultimate authenticity. However, they have digested the influence of the historical avant-gardes and turned experimentation into something else; an experimentalist fiction, which is constructed to the point of exhaustion, and aims to perform a change upon the recipient's traditional reading experience. Beyond this thesis, further study of this kind could be carried out with the study of other books such as Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* (1964), *Such* (1966) and *Between* (1968), Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* (1965) [*Three Trapped Tigers* (1971)], and B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* and Georges Perec's *A Void*.³⁵ In fact, recent

³² Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 3.

³³ Hutcheon 4.

³⁴ David E. Wellbery, "Postmodernism in Europe: On Recent German Writing," *Postmodernism: An International Survey*, ed. Alan Trachtenburg (Baton Rouge, 1985) 235.

³⁵ See Chapter 4.

publications by contemporary critics, such as *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, but also Julie Armstrong's *Experimental Fiction* and the forthcoming Ellen E. Berry's *Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique* (May, 2016) hint at the contemporary interest of this theme, and efforts are being made to define and theorise experimentalism at that historical moment. My work, then, is located in a crucial field of research in Comparative Studies; a field that could be further extended in order to disentangle the relationship between this experimentalism and mass-society. More broadly, my comparative study of Cortázar and Calvino's experimentalisms has also fulfilled a mediating role, by opening up a theoretical debate on the avant-gardes and the experimental in Paris throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a crucial moment during which the experimental unfastened from the avant-garde to become an experimentalism: a writing that conveys a will for formal experimentation with the political urgencies of the moment, which, after the Wars and the various experiences of dictatorial disasters, were seeking a more open and democratic representation.

APPENDIX I

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<p><i>Je parie que Joyce Mansour va s'occuper de ton côté érotique, donc moi je reste chaste, Margerite.</i></p> <p>I bet Joyce Mansour will take care of your erotic side, so I remain chaste, Margerite.</p> <p>(Cortázar)</p>
<p><i>Si tu trouves ça drôle qu'il m'ait affublé d'une telle morphologie.</i></p> <p>If you find it funny that he saddled me with such a morphology. (Cortázar)</p>
<p><i>Sous ta croix de marbre, ton ciel de nacre, avance, grand homme! Ronge ton silence. Tes dents ont soif.</i></p> <p>Beneath your marble cross, your nacre sky, advance, great man! Bite at your silence. Your teeth are thirsty. (Balthazar)</p>
<p><i>Mettez un tigre de papier dans votre carter! Vous ferez un pas en avant, deux pas en arrière.</i></p> <p>Put a paper tiger in your case! You take one step forward, two steps back. (Calvino)</p>
<p><i>Vous ne savez pas à qui vous avez affaire, Monsieur !</i></p> <p>You do not know who you are dealing with, Sir! (Mansour)</p>
<p><i>Tu rêves comme un bœuf. Trop de loisirs, mon petit !...</i></p> <p>You dream as an ox. Too much spare time, my boy!... (Balthazar)</p>
<p><i>Pour des gens comme nous, Sire, toute ligne de conduit et tout point de vue exigent d'abord une bonne conduit des lignes et une juste vue des points.</i></p> <p>For people like us, Sir, any course of action and any point of view require from the beginning good action of courses and fair views of points. (Cortázar)</p>
<p><i>Laisse-moi, de l'ensemble, souligner la caresse Qui moule dans l'écaille le chemin de ma peau...</i></p> <p>Let me, from all this, underline the caress that moulds on the surface the path of my skin...(Balthazar)</p>
<p><i>Bande d'attrape-mouches, vous me goberez la lune!</i></p> <p>Piece of flypaper, you will swallow the moon for me! (Balthazar)</p>

Capricorne?

Capricorn? (Balthazar)

Il est meilleur d'honorer père et mère que de maçonner des tours avec des corps d'enfants.

It is better to honour father and mother than build towers with the bodies of children.

(Mansour)

Il faut déjouer les tours de la cathédrale.

He must avoid the towers of the cathedral. (Mansour)

Laisse les jours agir. La mort est une puissance stationnaire.

Let the days pass. Death is a stationary power. (Mansour)

Le Paul avait raison, ce soleil-là est vraiment une faute éclatante.

Paul was right, that sun there is a truly dazzling error. (Cortázar)

Et quand j'étais petit, tu retournais mon oreiller écrasé par trop de cauchemars...

And when I was little, you returned my pillow flattened by too many nightmares...

(Balthazar)

La Traviata, c'est comme ça!

La Traviata is like that! (Balthazar)

Au fur et à mesure que les Furies me furètent, le fou-rire me rend aburi.

Gradually, as the Furies pursued me, their laughter makes me bewildered. (Calvino)

Je n'ai jamais fait une fausse couche, moi!

I've never had a miscarriage, not me! (Balthazar)

Bien sûr que la Révolution est souhaitable, cher ami, mais tout de même, il ne faudrait pas qu'elle porte atteinte aux valeurs qui ont fait de nous ce que nous sommes.

Certainly the revolution is desirable, dear friend, but still, it should not affect the values that have made us what we are. (Cortázar)

Well aren't you supposed to stop smoking? (Mansour)
It will be better for you if you dress as a European. (Mansour)
You make me sick. (Mansour) ¹
<i>Entre cul-de-jatte et rien de cul du tout, quelle peine, messieurs, c'est faire l'amour debout.</i> Between having no legs and no arse at all, what a pain it is, gentlemen, to make love standing up. (Calvino)
<i>Un parfum d'homme sous mes pattes... ...un murmure de plumes tièdes...</i> Scent of mankind under my feet... ...a whisper of warm feathers... (Balthazar)
<i>Inutile de demander un condor au lieu de la colombe, on n'a pas encore découvert l'Amérique.</i> No point in asking a condor instead of a dove; we have not yet discovered America. (Cortázar)
<i>Qu'advierait-il de la culture occidentale si non n'avait pas de glaçons pour les drinks?</i> What would happen to Western culture if it did not have ice for drinks? (Cortázar)
<i>J'aime ce brin de soleil sur ta joue gauche, petit cratère plat dans l'ombre de ton sourire...</i> I love this bit of sunshine on your left cheek, smooth little hollow in the shadow of your smile... (Balthazar)
<i>Rince-toi le museau, mon doux rapace!</i> Clean your brawn, my sweet raptor! (Balthazar)
<i>Le noir est toujours habillé.</i> Black is always dressed. (Mansour)
<i>Une chose est sûre, l'état d'apesanteur ne nous arrange guère.</i> One thing is certain: the state of weightlessness does not suit us. (Cortázar)
<i>Dès qu'il se met à raconter ce qu'il vient de voir à la Télé, je me sens un smog aux mirettes.</i> As soon as he begins to talk about what he has seen on TV, I feel a mist on my eyes.

¹ Mansour writes these in English in the original.

(Cortázar)
<i>Séparons-nous sans un regard de plus. Ton ventre me brûle au dos.</i> Let's part now without further thought. Your stomach burns me as I turn my back.
(Balthazar)
<i>Tes mains, ô tes mains... Tes mains qui gonflent et griffent... Ma nuit, ma lune aux angles rouges...</i> Your hands, oh your hands... Your hands which swell and scratch... My night, my moon with red edges... (Balthazar)
<i>En Etrurie il y a cent hétaires dans un kilomètre carré.</i> In Etruria there a hundred prostitutes in a square kilometre. (Mansour) ²
<i>C'est-y pas malheureux, y a que quand il pleure qu'il devient drôle.</i> Isn't it unfortunate, some people when they cry they become funny. (Cortázar)
<i>Je vous l'ai dit cent fois: les mots m'ont plus de goût.</i> I have told you a hundred times: words have more flavour for me. (Balthazar)
<i>Plus d'espoir, ma fougère.</i> More hope my fern. (Balthazar) ³
<i>Ce qu'il n'a pu achever par l'épée, je l'accomplirai par la langue.</i> What he could not complete by the sword, I will achieve through language. (Mansour)
<i>Est-ce qu'il est Eskyle le killer?</i> Who is that, Eskyle the killer? (Calvino)

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Voyez un peu ces dames. Elles racontent nos verges aux cailloux.

Just look at these ladies. They tell about our sticks to the stones. (Mansour)

Étant né en Belgique, Cortázar nous trouve tout a fait naturels, comme quoi on devrait prier notre papa

² There is an untranslatable joke here, involving the similarity between “hetaires” – meaning prostitutes – and hectares.

³ Here I assume that “Fern” is a term of endearment but it might refer to one of the illustrations.

chéri de lui envoyer des carbonades bien chaudes.

Being born in Belgium, Cortazar [sic] finds we are quite natural, which shows we should beg our beloved dad to send him good hot stews. (Cortázar)

Ton épaule..., tes ailes grincent.

Your shoulder..., your wings squeak. (Balthazar)

Il faut tuer l'oiseau-piqueur-de nombrils pendant son sommeil.

We must kill the woodpecker of belly buttons in its sleep. (Mansour)

Voici une petite aumône, la T.V.A. étant, bien entendu, à votre charge.

Here is a small donation; the VAT is, of course, at your expense. (Cortázar)

Sfessania mes fesses!

Sfessania my ass! (Calvino)

Marquez la cadence! Le silence n'a pas d'odeur. Il est blanc comme un soupir. Comme une hostie chiffonnée, je vous dis!

Note the rhythm! Silence has no smell. It is white like a sigh. Like a crumpled host, I tell you! (Balthazar)⁴

Tu blasphèmes, papillon sans ailes.

You are blaspheming, flightless butterfly. (Balthazar)

Au reste c'est Oreste.

The rest is Orestes. (Calvino)

Votre Sainteté, on murmure dans Rome que Calvino ne croit pas en Dieu!

Your Holiness, it is rumoured in Rome that Calvino does not believe in God! (Cortázar)

Cet aigle me fait penser que, chaque fois que l'un de nous essaye d'interpeller Reinhoud pour lui dire ses quatre vérités, il n'attrape qu'une plume.

This eagle makes me think that whenever one of us tries to call Reinhoud to tell him a

⁴ Perhaps “host” here could refer to the “holy ghost”.

few truths, he grabs a pen. (Cortázar)⁵

Quel Callot tu as!

What a Callot you have! (Calvino)⁶

Vous m'arrachez un doute.

You tear a doubt from me. (Balthazar)

Pourquoi suis-je velu? Pourquoi, l'espace d'une rue, les chauves-souris m'agrippent-elles aux aisselles?

Pourquoi ne suis-je jamais nu?

Why am I hairy? Why, along the street, do bats cling to my armpits? Why am I never naked? (Mansour)

Pardieu, est-ce d'Artagnan qui me prend pour Richelieu, ou quelqu'un qui râle parce qu'il pense que je suis Richelieu en train de le prendre pour d'Artagnan?

By god, is d'Artagnan who takes me for Richelieu, or is there someone groaning because he thinks I'm Richelieu about to take him for d'Artagnan? (Cortázar)

Vers le cercueil, Seigneur, coule le sang de tes fils.

Towards the coffin, Lord, flows the blood of your son. (Balthazar)

Vous me ressemblez. Je suis heureux pour nous de cette ressemblance.

You're like me. I'm happy for us that we are similar. (Mansour)

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Et je me souviens d'une feuille de chêne qui ressemblait à un labyrinthe sans racines. La terre était un peu morte ce jour-là.

And I remember an oak leaf that seemed to be a rootless maze. The ground was a bit dead that day. (Balthazar)

Range mes songes, et déplie-moi.

⁵ Note that “plume” could also be translated as “feather,” in reference to “eagle.”

⁶ Probably referring to the baroque printmaker Jacques Callot.

Range my dreams, and unfolds to me. (Balthazar)

Avec un cornet pareil, madame, je comprends que vous soyez de glace.

With a horn like that, madam, I understand that you are glacial. (Cortázar)

Que penserais-tu d'un gazon émaillé de fines oreilles ?

What would you think of a lawn dotted with attentive ears? (Mansour)

Balthazar, Balthazar... Oui, mais lui il avait Melchior et Gaspard pour trimbaler la bimbeloterie.

Balthazar, Balthazar ... Yes, but he had Melchior and Gaspar to carry the trinkets around.

(Cortázar)

Abstraite, la géométrie? Même Euclide savait que la partie la plus exploitable du triangle est la base!

Abstract, geometry? Even Euclid knew that the most exploitable part of the triangle is the base! (Cortázar)

La parole est un arbre toujours vert. Il n'y a pas deux verbes Etre. Avoir le vertige.

The word is an evergreen tree. There are not two verbs Being. Feel dizzy. (Mansour)

Je vous le dis, la marquise restera prisonnière de la transpiration sous les bras.

I tell you, the Marquise will remain prisoner of the sweat under her arms. (Balthazar)

Aujourd'hui qui improvise? Pas la vierge empêtrée dans sa virginité, ni l'assassin blafard, fatigué de son crime avant même d'en connaître l'auteur. Seul le prêtre et le chirurgien...

Today who improvises? Not the virgin entangled in her virginity, not the pale murderer, tired of his crime before even knowing the author. Only the priest and the surgeon...

(Mansour)

Bien sûr je vous ai demandé un pédicure, Reinhoud, mais quand même!

Of course I asked you for a pedicure, Reinhoud, but even so! (Cortázar)

Ah !, s'il m'avait foutu à la page 34, qu'est-ce qu'elle prendrait cette salope-là!

Ah, if he had screwed me at page 34, what would that bitch take there! (Cortázar)

Tu zézayes ma tourterelle.

You lisp, my dove. (Balthazar)

Au pas menus, tes seins de flanelle et tes grands horizons...

At a slow pace, your flannel breasts and your wide horizons ... (Balthazar)

Et le poids du monde, si lourd au dos, comme un poisson d'avril... Pauvre vieille branche d'asperge !

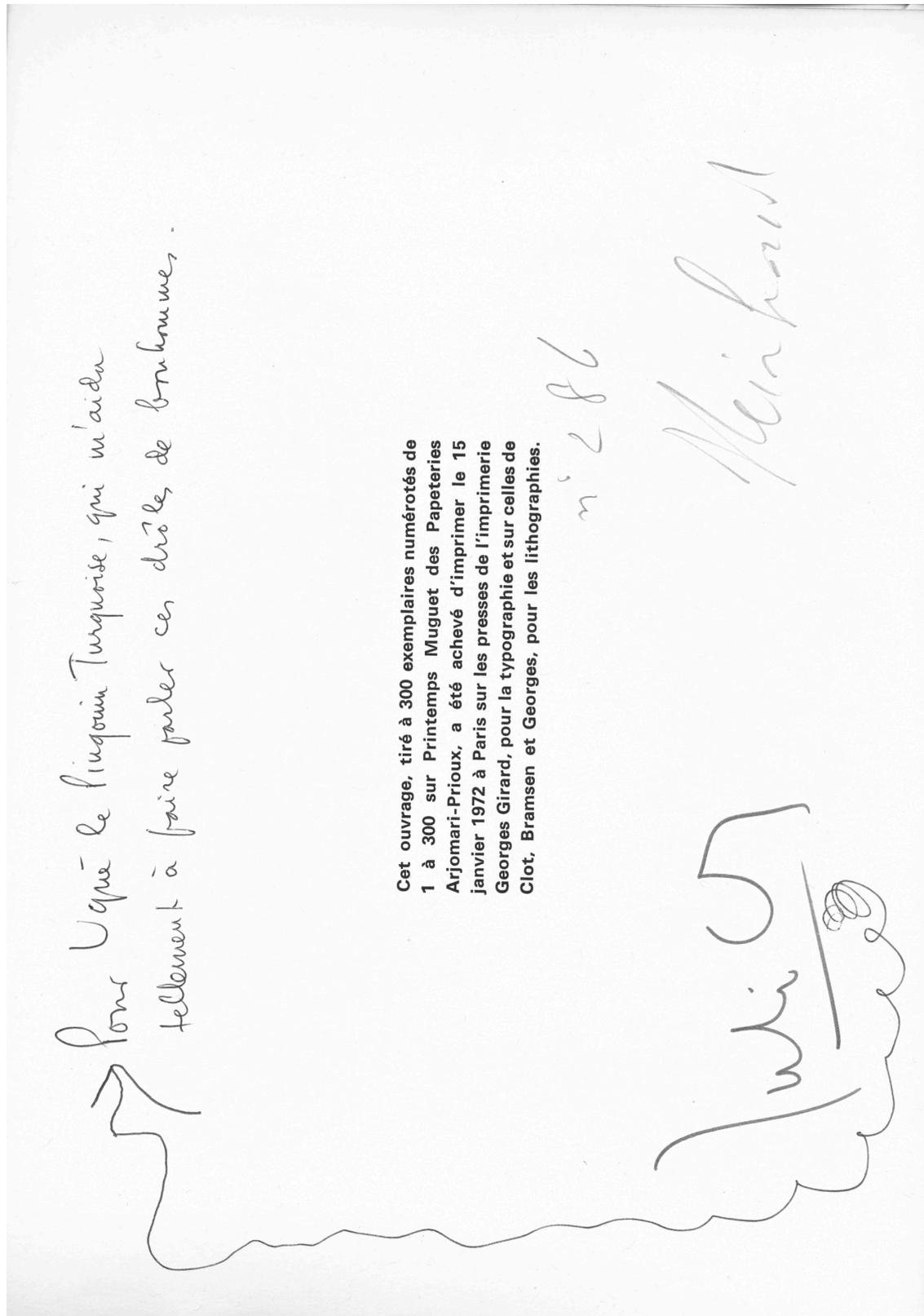
And the weight of the world, so heavy at your back, like an April Fool's joke ... Poor old asparagus branch! (Balthazar)

J'ai, cher ami, la chair de poule.

I, my dear friend, have goosebumps. (Mansour)

APPENDIX II

Colophon of *La fosse de Babel* signed by Reinhoud (with a dedicatory by Cortázar to Ugné Karvelis):



First lithography by Reinhold in *La fosse de Babel*.



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