Translating Influences: Examining Julio Cortázar’s Literary Relationship to Edgar Allan Poe

by

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“Hay en nosotros una presencia oscura de Poe, una latencia de Poe. Todos, en algún sector de nuestra persona, somos él, y él fue uno de los grandes portavoces del hombre…”

[There is in us a dark presence of Poe, a latency of Poe. All of us, in some aspect of our personality, are Poe, and he was one of humanity’s great spokesmen…]

-Julio Cortázar,
“El poeta, el narrador y el crítico” (1956)
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Introduction

Julio Cortázar’s strong attraction to the works of Edgar Allan Poe, especially his prose, is deeply rooted in the Argentine’s literary upbringing. The antebellum author’s place in Cortázar’s childhood was both prominent and memorable, which explains Cortázar’s continued fascination with Poe throughout his literary career. The Argentine’s relationship to Poe began at an early age, as he describes,

For me, Edgar Allan Poe’s influence was decisive; when I secretly read his stories (my mother didn’t want to let me read them, knowing I was too impressionable), I must have been eight or nine, and I literally got ill on them! Terror gripped me; I remember I slept in a small room at the top of the house, a house in the suburbs, very lonely, very dark; there was no electricity, my room was lit by a candle; and terror gripped me after I read Edgar Allan Poe, so great a terror that every evening before I went to bed, I would make a complete inspection of the room.¹

In many other interviews and essays, Cortázar mentions this profound fascination with Poe, consistently citing the lasting effect these stories had on him. This effect is quintessentially Poe-like insofar as he coined the phrase “unity of effect” in his 1864 essay “The Philosophy of Composition.”² For Poe, this phrase meant that an author should choose a central unifying force that he or she wishes the reader to experience, that unites all readers. This concept is one that Cortázar would explore in his own works as well as in his translations of Poe. Part of Poe’s “decisive” influence on Cortázar is related to this “unity of effect.”

² Originally published in April of 1864 in Graham’s Magazine. In this piece, Poe outlines his creation of his most famous poem, “The Raven.”
Cortázar worked closely with Poe’s works when, in the 1950s, he and his wife, Aurora Bernárdez, herself a prolific translator, began work as freelance translators for UNESCO in Europe. Focusing mainly on these contracted translations from English and French into Spanish, Cortázar worked for four months before devoting himself to his own pursuits of writing and translating literature. Among these pursuits was the ambitious undertaking of translating all of Edgar Allan Poe’s prose works from English to Spanish. Francisco Ayala, a professor at the University of Puerto Rico, offered Cortázar $3,000 USD to complete the project. After traveling to Italy with Bernárdez to begin the project in September of 1953, Cortázar embarked on what would become a two-year long saga of translating Poe’s short stories as well as essays. He worked tirelessly, completing little of his own work, writing only a few poems and finishing some stories in his short story collection Final del juego [1956: End of the Game]. In the end, Cortázar translated seventy-seven short stories, Poe’s only completed novel The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, the prose poem Eureka, and a volume of Poe’s essays and criticisms.

This large-scale translation project is a major point of connection that serves to unite these two authors. But the link between these two authors also takes other forms and is well-studied. A plethora of scholarship has been devoted to understanding Poe’s place in the literary history of Latin America, Cortázar’s

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3 Bernárdez translated authors such as Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.
6 The completed project was published in two volumes: Edgar Allan Poe: Obras en prosa I, Cuentos and Edgar Allan Poe: Obras en prosa II, Narración de Arthur Gordon Pym, Ensayos y Críticas, Eureka.
relationship to the antebellum author, and his Spanish translations of Poe’s work, among many other topics: it ranges from translation studies to comparative approaches to theoretical understandings of the short story as a genre. Poe’s contributions to the latter have been recognized across languages and nations; however, more specifically, his relationship to the Spanish-speaking world has had a complex, albeit brief, history. Much of the scholarship in English focuses on comparative studies of specific works from each author, especially when a particular Poe story has clearly impacted a particular Cortázar story. These more studied comparisons include, but are certainly not limited to, Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” and Cortázar’s “Casa tomada,” [House Taken Over] of which I will go into depth in the second chapter, as well as Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Cortázar’s “El otro cielo” [The Other Heaven]. ⁷ Although comparative approaches to the works of these two authors are the most prominent, scholars have also dedicated research to translations of Poe’s work from other translators as well, not just Cortázar, especially with respect to how Poe has been and continues to be received in the Spanish-speaking world. ⁸ Furthermore, theoretical approaches to this relationship have also been prominent in comparing

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⁷ Throughout the entirety of this project, all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
Cortázar’s work to that of Poe, including discussions of each author’s understanding of the short story as a genre.

The themes and narrational subjects in Poe’s stories are strikingly similar to those of Cortázar’s works, demonstrating the author’s strong effect on the Argentine writer. In this respect, Daniel Bautista, in a comparative analysis of “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Casa tomada” posits, “the stories share enough similarities to make it [“Casa tomada”] read like a modern rewriting of the Poe tale.”

Even within this specific comparison, scholarly approaches in regard to this influence vary from psychoanalytical readings to political interpretations on the creativity present in each story to formal explorations of the aesthetics of the works. Brett Levinson takes the Freudian approach to reading “Casa tomada,” explaining, “Thus, uncanny doppelgangers abound throughout ‘Casa tomada.’ The rightful occupants are doubled by the outside entities that appropriate this ownership, also by right.” Levinson also introduces a political reading: “referring to the rise of Peronism in the 40s, the subsequent politicization of the Argentine working class, and the destabilization [sic.] of the bourgeoisie. The narrator hints at the issue as he explains how it is possible to live in great material comfort without an income-earning job.” Clearly, scholars involved in both Poe studies as well as

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10 With respect to Poe, see Tang Weisheng’s “Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic Aesthetics of Things: Rereading ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” in Style 52, no. 3 (2018), 287-301. For a political interpretation of Cortázar’s “Casa tomada,” see María Gabriela Mizraje’s article “‘Casa tomada’ de Cortázar: políticas de la lengua,” in Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana 34, no. 68 (2008), 143-163.
12 Levinson, 102.
Cortázar studies have an interest in exploring this literary connection through a plethora of lenses and perspectives.

Another Cortázar story that has drawn connections to a Poe story is Cortázar’s “El otro cielo,” which has been studied alongside Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Although the plots of these two stories are not as similar as the previously cited comparative example, the emphasis on place, specifically in Paris, is what unites these texts. While the entirety of Poe’s story takes place in Paris, Cortázar’s work shifts between Paris and Buenos Aires, demonstrating a command of urban settings. Christopher Rollason examines this relationship, focusing on the employment of pairs both within and between the two works: “The theme of doubling is written across both tales, with agents and locations endlessly and disturbingly reflecting off each other—Dupin and ape, ape and sailor, the Dupin-narrator and L’Espanaye dyads and the apartments of both; Laurent and South American, narrator and South American, Paris and Buenos Aires, Güemes and Vivienne.”

With abundant literary comparisons, focusing on the texts themselves, much has been researched while exploring themes, characters, and narrational styles.

A similarly important approach to better understanding this relationship and deep influence has been a study of Cortázar’s translations of Poe’s stories. Although the Argentine’s translations were originally published in 1956, it was not until the

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1970s that his translations were as widely circulated as they continue to be today. As mentioned before, Poe’s relationship to the Spanish-speaking world has been a series of complex histories, one of which includes the varying degrees to which Latin American and Spanish authors and translators took to his work. As Cortázar was Argentinian, his language use obviously mirrored the spoken Spanish of the Río de la Plata region of South America, which includes parts of Argentina and Uruguay. José R. Ibáñez explores the implications of Cortázar’s occasionally niche use of Spanish in his translation of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” In doing so, Ibáñez not only compares the translation to the original, but he also relates Cortázar’s translation to more recent Spanish translations. He focuses primarily on vocabulary choices and the ways in which these translation choices influence, or even change, the Spanish reading of the story. For example, Ibáñez explains how Cortázar’s local word choice for Poe’s expression “death watches,” a noise made by a type of beetle, excludes large amounts of Spanish readers: “Indeed, translating ‘death watches’ for ‘taladro,’ a word which we can assume is widely used in the Río de la Plata region, puzzles readers in Spanish who are unfamiliar with its meaning.” As a result, an essential aspect to Cortázar’s relation to Poe is the ways in which his translations have both maintained and altered, to certain degrees, the

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15 Refer to Lois Davis Vines’ *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, and Affinities* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999). Specifically, see therein Susan F. Levine and Stuart Levine’s chapters “Rubén Dario” and “Carlos Fuentes,” Graciela E. Tissera’s chapter “Jorge Luis Borges,” and Mary G. Berg’s chapters “Julio Cortázar” and “Horacio Quiroga.”
16 The River Plate region, or el Río de la Plata in Spanish, is a region in South America that is formed by the river of the same name, flowing into the Atlantic Ocean between Argentina and Uruguay. Buenos Aires, Argentina and Montevideo, Uruguay both sit on this estuary.
original stories. Ibáñez’s major focus is the possibility of translating, or in this case, mistranslating not necessarily diction, plot or style, but rather losing or modifying Poe’s “unity of effect” by translating the author from one language to another.

On a theoretical level, both Poe and Cortázar have contributed immensely to the genre of the short story. While Poe, in some ways, serves as a starting point for Cortázar’s own fiction, the two authors have certainly influenced the way the short story is both written and read. David Kelman unites Poe and Cortázar through Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the short story as a genre. Kelman relates Cortázar’s theories of the “cuento,” or short story, to the works of Benjamin and Poe. Kelman is interested in Cortázar’s idea of “artificial” storytelling, which he describes as “a mode of telling a story after traditional storytelling is no longer possible.”

Poe serves as an example for both Benjamin and Cortázar insofar as Benjamin sees Poe’s short stories as real, or traditional stories, while Cortázar cites Poe’s stories as examples of “the modern.” While Cortázar and Benjamin are not in dialogue specifically with each other, the two are certainly in dialogue through the works of Poe and their respective understandings of the short story as a mode of storytelling, be that traditional or modern. As a result, besides comparative studies of stories or translations, the theory behind the works of both Poe and Cortázar is a way to unite the two authors across literary movements, different cultures, and even different languages. It bears mention that in all of these studies, which focus on influence, there is an underlying chronological order, where Cortázar is read through Poe.

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With this project, my hope is to continue the conversation that other scholars have begun with respect to Poe and Cortázar studies. In the first chapter, I argue that Cortázar’s “Axolotl” adopts various topics, including physical and mental entrapment, from Poe’s “The Premature Burial.” In doing so, Cortázar modifies a traditionally Gothic fear of being buried alive and shifts the depiction of confinement from one of fear to one of acceptance. As far as I am aware, no previous scholarship compares these two short stories, yet Poe’s mark on this specific Cortázar story is evident. This comparison highlights the breadth of Poe’s influence on the Argentine, which extends beyond stories that are comparable on a surface level.

In chapter two, I return to a previously studied comparison between Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” and Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Beyond the more glaring similarities between these two short stories, I use the relationship between the two to trace a link between fantastic and Gothic literature, the latter as a precursor to the former. The house as a representative of a supernatural presence forms the central theme of each story, and this unifying theme serves as an entry point to understanding Cortázar’s adoption of traditionally Gothic tropes.

In the third and final chapter, I examine Cortázar’s relationship to translation throughout his literary career, mapping a trajectory of his understanding of the role of translating and being translated. My aim is to rework an understanding of influence. As mentioned earlier, literary influences tend to be, understandably, conceptualized chronologically. But could influences be read retrospectively? To answer this question, I offer an English translation of an essay by Cortázar, in which
he discusses the effects of Gothic literature on authors from the River Plate Region. Cortázar’s understanding of influence allows for this reworking so as to permit a reading of Poe through Cortázar. With respect to the title of this thesis, “Translating Influences,” I attempt to amplify the term translation. In doing so, translation can be read as an adjective, which is to say that the act of translating goes beyond the literal in translating a language, and also encompasses translations of style and, in this case, influence.

As a side note on vocabulary, I frequently utilize the Spanish terms *lo gótico* and *lo fantástico* to refer to that which is Gothic and that which is fantastic, respectively. Beyond these literal translations, however, these terms also tend to connote the essence of, or the sensations linked with, Gothic literature and fantastic literature. My aim is to formalize these terms so as to not make them derivative and to have them be read as unique to the Hispanic literary world, elevating the terms in the realm of world literatures. Finally, I introduce the Spanish term *lo real* to signify the reader’s reality, which exists independently of any reality created in Cortázar’s works.
Chapter 1

An Untimely Confinement

In the introduction to his translations, *Edgar Allan Poe: Obras en prosa I*, Cortázar explains of Poe’s short stories, “Sus cuentos tienen para nosotros la fascinación de los acuarios, de las bolas de cristal, donde, en el centro inalcanzable, hay una escena transparente y petrificada” [His stories have for us the fascination of aquariums, of crystal balls, where, in the unattainable center, there is a transparent and petrified scene] (emphasis mine).¹ This fascination, specifically in Cortázar’s example of an aquarium, is one that Cortázar not only translates literally in Poe’s stories from English to Spanish, but also through a translation of concepts derived from Poe into Cortázar’s own work.

During my research into comparative approaches to reading Cortázar’s stories in relation to Poe’s stories, I did not find any scholarship dedicated to a comparison or discussion of Cortázar’s “Axolotl” (1956) and Poe’s “The Premature Burial” (1844). In 1956, about a year after having completed his translations of Poe, Cortázar published “Axolotl” in *Final del juego*. Although Poe’s story does not necessarily deal with the fantastic in the way that Cortázar’s story does, the two works are notably connected through the overarching themes of entrapment and confinement. Besides the more obvious connection of the two protagonists’ interment, each author offers a commentary on the physical and mental effects on their respective narrators, albeit in fundamentally different ways. For one, Poe’s

¹ Julio Cortázar, “El poeta, el narrador y el crítico,” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Obras en Prosa I, Cuentos* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: La Editorial Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2009), lxxviii.
main character is preoccupied with the idea of being buried alive, a corporeal imprisonment within a confined space underground. On the other hand, while Cortázar’s story similarly comments on entombment, the entrapment of the narrator within an amphibian, an axolotl, which is also confined to an aquarium tank, deals more so with the effects of awareness and consciousness, which now occupy not only a different body, but also a different type of body, that of an aquatic animal. Cortázar’s story takes Poe’s version or logic of entrapment one step further, taking it to the level of the fantastic. What I aim to elucidate in this comparison are the stylistic and thematic similarities as well as the ways in which each author creates a certain logic within the world of their respective stories. In “The Present State of Fiction in Latin America,” Cortázar addresses the concept of fantastic literature, reluctantly defining it as that which “consists of turning one’s back on a reality universally accepted as normal, that is, as not fantastic, in order to explore other corridors of that immense house in which man lives.” Additionally, my goal is to take this working definition of fantastic literature, specifically characteristic of the River Plate region, according to Cortázar, and apply his understanding of *lo fantástico* to his narrational approach in “Axolotl.”

Poe’s “The Premature Burial”

In “The Premature Burial” an unnamed man confesses his deepest fear of being buried alive through first-person narration. Poe entertains the fantastical through the satire of a prominent concern during the nineteenth century, ultimately

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aiming to poke fun at the absurdity of this specific anxiety: “To be buried alive, is beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality.”

Although the narrator’s fears are personal, he grounds them in the collective of humanity, arguing that despite the fact that an individual is the one who experiences the actual entombment, the mere idea of a premature interment is a shared preoccupation. Explaining the difficulty in truly knowing the limits of life, the man argues, “The boundaries which divide Life from Death, are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins!” He then goes on to cite examples from medical journals and other personal experiences.

All of these instances of premature burials follow logical conclusions, and the narrator meticulously explains the details of the individual cases so as to prove that there is nothing fantastical about a premature burial, but rather that it is a reality to be feared. For example, he describes the case of a young lawyer, Mr. Edward Stapleton, who was buried for two days after a suspected case of typhus fever. Due to “some anomalous symptoms,” medical students were interested in performing an autopsy. However, they were unable to gain approval, so they resorted to employing “body-snatchers” to exhume the body. During one of the surgeries, the man awoke and arose from the operating table, where medical students had been performing various scientific studies. “He declares that at no period was he altogether insensible,” explains the narrator, “that, dully and confusedly, he was

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4 Poe, 357.
aware of everything which happened to him.”

Although Mr. Stapleton appeared to be deceased, the anomalous symptoms merely masked the fact that he was alive.

The narrator’s summaries of this and other instances set the stage for his personal recount of the time he believed he had been prematurely buried. His experience is prefaced by an explanation of the precautions he took so as to be sure that if he were to be buried alive, he would have the proper means to escape. These precautions include a spring-loaded casket lid, food and water rations, and a large bell attached to a rope. Despite all of these steps, the narrator finds himself in a dark enclosed space, with little memory of how he ended up confined. He immediately jumps to the conclusion that his worst fear has been realized and that he is buried alive in a casket not of his own creation: “I was lost in reveries of death, and the idea of premature burial held continual possession of my brain.”

As he recounts the tale, he remembers leaving for a journey by boat, and ultimately realizes that he was in a small, poorly lit cabin space beneath the ship. As he awakes, he describes, “And now, at last, as if by the rush of an ocean, my shuddering spirit is overwhelmed by the one grim Danger—by the one spectral and ever-prevalent Idea.” The presence of the water imagery is an important one in “The Premature Burial” as well as in Cortázar’s story, to which I will return to later. For now, it is worthwhile to emphasize that there is a clearly logical explanation to the narrator’s sense of being buried: the man, asleep and confined to a tight space beneath the deck of a ship, misremembers where he is and where he has been. With that said,

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5 Poe, 361.
6 Poe, 363.
7 Poe, 365.
however, I argue that Poe entertains the idea of the absurd throughout the story. The idea of a premature burial seems so outlandish, that one almost expects for there to be an explanation that defies reality. The fantastical circumstance of a premature interment is and remains a debilitating fear for the narrator, who only overcomes this terror by experiencing the sensation of an untimely entombment. Whereas Cortázar’s story turns its “back on reality,” to use his phrasing, deviating not only in content but also in style, Poe entertains the fantastical with satire through a neurotic narrator whose principal concern is an outdated fear of being buried alive.

In his citations of other cases in medical or investigative journals, Poe’s protagonist establishes the notion that there have been methodic explanations of the circumstances surrounding the mistaken deaths. By creating this line of logic from case to case, that there is in fact a reasonable explanation for the mishap, Poe, then, asks the reader to continue this logic while considering the narrator’s account of his “premature burial.” Since the cited examples are all reasonably explained by the narrator himself, it only makes sense then that what he perceives to be his own burial must in fact be a mistake with a sound explanation. As it becomes clear at the end of the story, he was never actually buried as he was believed to be, but rather in a confined space at the bottom of a ship. Poe’s anticipation of the fantastic, then, is not connected to his narrator’s specific case of a burial, but rather is invoked by likening this concern to all of humanity.
Cortázar’s “Axolotl”

Echoing the obsession of being faced with mortality from Poe’s tale, the first-person narrator in “Axolotl” fixates himself on the titular aquatic animals. This fascination manifests itself in multiple visits to an aquarium in Paris, specifically to the tank that contains the axolotls. Cortázar’s narrator focuses on the anthropomorphic features of the axolotls including their “manos” [hands] and “mejillas” [cheeks]. He explains, “Aislé mentalmente una, situada a la derecho y algo separada de las otras para estudiarla mejor” [I mentally isolated one, situated to the right and separated from the others to study it better]. His obsession with these fish-like amphibians results in his desire not only to watch them, but also to study their physical characteristics. In his descriptions of the axolotls, the narrator anthropomorphizes the salamanders, defining their features as if they were parts of a human body. These descriptors add to the ambiguity of the narrator’s physical form later in the story, as in the opening he declares, “Ahora soy un axolotl” [Now I am an axolotl].

The eyes of the axolotls are of significant importance to the narrator, for he feels as though they are expressing consciousness or awareness of a sentient creature: “Los ojos de los axolotl me decían de la presencia de una vida diferente, de otra manera de mirar” [The axolotl’s eyes expressed to me the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing] (emphasis mine). The act of observation

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8 An axolotl is an aquatic salamander that is native to Mexico and parts of western United States. The animal is also known as the Mexican walking fish. The term axolotl comes from Nahuatl.
10 Cortázar, 345.
is critical to the relationship between the narrator and the fish-like amphibian, since it is their only form of communication. The narrator and the other axolotls can only interact visually and express meaning or significance through their gazes. The eyes of the axolotl allow for a dialogue of sorts, unlike the other fish in the tanks. “Al lado de ellos, en los restantes acuarios,” explains the narrator, “diversos peces me mostraban la simple estupidez de sus hermosos ojos semejantes a los nuestros” [To the side of them, in the remaining tanks, diverse fish showed me the simple stupidity of their beautiful eyes similar to ours].

In singling out the eyes of the axolotl, the narrator observes an inherent characteristic of sorts that sets these fish-like creatures apart from others, and this characteristic is that which serves as a bridge between man and animal. For example, in sensing this languageless, nonverbal communication, he says of the axolotl, “Su mirada ciega, el diminuto disco de oro inexpresivo y sin embargo terriblemente lúcido, me penetraba como un mensaje: ‘Sálvanos, sálvanos’” [Its blind gaze, the small, inexpressive gold disc and yet terribly clear, pierced me like a message: “Save us, save us”]. Why do the axolotls need to be saved and from what? Or, perhaps a more appropriate question is: why does the man-narrator imagine or want to believe that these axolotls desire salvation? Without proper means of communication, the man is left to interpret “its blind gaze,” to find meaning in the silence. This blind gaze suggests that the axolotl does not physically appear to have a complex consciousness, yet the man’s connection to these animals allows him to understand them on a deeper level. Furthermore, knowing that the man is an axolotl throughout possibly implies that

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11 Cortázar, 345.
12 Cortázar, 346.
he too is asking for salvation without the ability to express this desire. The man is conscious of his axolotl counterpart’s consciousness and thus infers his own desire (as the axolotl) to be saved.

Observation, then, the act of methodically looking, is rendered a form of consumption. The aquarium’s guard even recognizes the importance of the narrator’s gaze: “‘Usted se los come con los ojos’, me decía riendo el guardián, que debía suponerme un poco desequilibrado” [“You eat them with your eyes,” the guard would say, laughing, who must have supposed that I was a little unbalanced]. As the observer, the narrator focuses on a single one to describe its “rostro inexpreso” [inexpressive face] with eyes “de un oro transparente” [of a transparent gold]. However, he then transitions into the first-person plural: “Es que no nos gusta movernos mucho… El tiempo se siente menos si nos estamos quietos” [It’s that we don’t like to move a lot… Time is felt less if we are calm]. Despite the earlier declaration, the concluding sentence of the opening paragraph in fact, “Ahora soy un axolotl” [Now I am an axolotl], this is the first time the narrator refers to himself as one of them. This pronoun shift, as critic Marta Sánchez rightly points out, blurs the line as to who or what is speaking: “We begin reading the story thinking that the pronoun Yo (“I”) refers to the man. No sooner do we come to the third sentence, ‘Ahora soy un axolotl’ (‘Now I am an axolotl’), but we

13 Cortázar, 346.
14 Cortázar, 345.
15 Cortázar, 343.
learn that ‘I’ also refers to the axolotl. In “Axolotl” we are not certain who or what is speaking.”\textsuperscript{16}

This uncertainty is a major focal point in terms of narration, as the reader expects the narrator to be one or the other, the axolotl or the man. A shift occurs physically, where the narrator realizes he is now an axolotl, looking out at a man staring back at him: “Solo una cosa era extraña: seguir pensando como antes, saber. Darme cuenta de eso fue en el primer momento como el horror del enterrado vivo que desperta a su destino” [Only one thing was strange: to continue thinking as before, knowing. To realize this was the first moment of the horror of the one being buried alive, who awakens to his fate] (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{17} The narrator who began the story, then, no longer is a man, but rather an axolotl who has maintained the consciousness and awareness of his former self. Notably, Cortázar structures this relationship between consciousness and body around the phrase “enterrado vivo” [buried alive] which unexpectedly brings to mind Poe’s story. However, whereas Poe’s chief concern is the entrapment of the body and the psychological effects this has on the one entombed; in “Axolotl,” Cortázar complicates this theme even further by encasing the consciousness of a man in the body of an axolotl. At the end of the story the axolotl-narrator expresses,

Me parece que de todo esto alcancé a comunicarle algo en los primeros días, cuando yo era todavía él. Y en esta soledad final, a la que él ya no vuelve, me consuela pensar que acaso va a escribir sobre nosotros, creyendo imaginar un cuento va a escribir todo esto sobre los axolotl.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Cortázar, 347.
\textsuperscript{18} Cortázar, 348.
It seems to me that I managed to communicate something to him in the early days when I was still him. And in this final solitude, to which he no longer returns, I console myself to think that perhaps he will write about us, believing to imagine a story he will write all this about the axolotls.

This meta-reflection on the story itself, that someone or something will write a story about the lives of the axolotls further complicates the question as to who or what is speaking. What is clear, however, is the distinction between the man-narrator and the axolotl-narrator. Although they appear to differ in physical appearance, the two, at the same time, seem to maintain a continuity through consciousness.

Although the narrator believes that the axolotl’s eyes express “the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing,” there is something inherently linguistic, language-based, in this communication. Through this expression, Cortázar raises the question of narration: Who or what is capable of communicating? How is this communication realized? This “presence of a different life,” it can be argued, is the shared awareness or consciousness of the man and the axolotl. Through Cortázar’s narrator there is no longer a divide between animal life and human life, but rather a fluid understanding of a simple existence and by extension a fluid construction of narration. The man is an axolotl and the axolotl is a man, perhaps not physically but certainly on the narrational level. Taking this one step further, I argue that as much as the concept of “another way of seeing” is applicable to the man and the axolotl, it is equally relevant to the reader’s relationship to the text. The reader must ignore all conventional understandings of narrative style and instead of assigning a specific narrator to the voice (either to the man or to the axolotl), must allow orthodox narrative techniques to dissipate in order to assume a single fluid voice, which alternates between man and animal.
With regards to the logic created within “Axolotl,” Cortázar structures the story around an idea so absurd that the reader must engage with the text presuming that the narrator is recounting the truth of his transmigration. The narrator begins with the self-declaration, “Ahora soy un axolotl” [Now I am an axolotl]. With this seemingly strange declaration, the reader is asked to take the narrator’s story at face value. In other words, the reader must assume that the man is a reliable narrator and that what he describes is true. Since the story is written in first person, there are no other perspectives to be gained. The only other instance of another perspective is that of the aquarium guard, who I would argue acts as a sort of testament to the absurdity of the man’s interactions with the axolotls. As a result, a reader either accepts this declaration as a truth and in doing so, reads the story as evidence of the man’s transformation or a reader denies this claim, thus unraveling the remainder of the story, rendering it utterly nonsensical. So, Cortázar sets the stage for a logic within the world of the story that defies the logic of a reader’s reality, lo real, where the reader must not differentiate between the man and the axolotl, but rather is forced to read them as one and the same. Marta Sánchez notes the implications this has for the reader by maintaining that “the reader must change his or her vantage point in relation to the speaker of the text, sometimes perceiving events from the vantage point of the man, sometimes from that of the fish.”  

19 Marta Sánchez, “A View from Inside the Fishbowl: Julio Cortázar’s ‘Axolotl,’” 43.
rather perceive the story from a unified perspective. The narration, then, moves between the human and the animal, with no real significance placed on one or the other, but rather a significance placed on the fact that the narration is fluid.

With this in mind, the presence of “another way of seeing” highlights not only the axolotl’s relationship to the man, but also the reader’s relationship to the narrator. There is a certain simultaneity of presence with respect to the narrator, who can be read as being present on both sides of the aquarium glass. That is, the line or the barrier between the world of man and the world of the axolotl is broken down within the story and outside of it, insofar as the reader considers the narrator capable of occupying two spaces at once. With this reading, one need not alternate between narrators, as Sánchez argues, but rather could view the narrative voice as that of both the man and the axolotl simultaneously. The continuity or transformation, whether that be of the man into an axolotl or vice versa could be understood in terms of translation. It is possible to read human-animal transformations or continuities as a metaphor for translation. This movement of translation connects the act of translating literature to the concept of a translatability between the animal and the human. For Cortázar, then, it can be argued that this question of narrative fluidity through a translation of forms, human to animal, is parallel to the act of translation itself, which serves as yet another connection to Poe.

20 This idea comes from Peggy McCraken, a scholar of medievalist literature. She posits the concept of human-animal translatability in Marie de France’s Lais. See: Peggy McCraken, “Translation and Animals in Marie de France’s Lais” in Australian Journal of French Studies 46, no. 3 (2009), 207.
To return to the relationship between the man and the axolotl, Cortázar’s narrator senses a connection between him and the axolotl from the start when he claims, “No hay nada extraño en esto, porque desde un primer momento comprendí que estábamos vinculados, que algo infinitamente perdido y distante seguía sin embargo uniéndonos” [There is nothing strange in this, because from the first moment I understood that we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant continued, however, joining us].

We as readers, then, are meant to believe in this relationship, this deep connection and to follow this logic to the end of the work. In the world of “Axolotl,” the ending of the story makes sense so long as the reader accepts the opening claim. In this way, Cortázar creates a logic that is counter to the reader’s reality all the while requiring that one accepts this logic as truth in the world of the text. This logic also diverges from the reality of the guard, who is also characterized by a duty of observation. Even though the guard is present for this interaction, this transformation, he only has the ability to observe the man as a man. The guard cannot, in the way a reader can through the text, enter the mind of the man, which is to also enter the mind of the axolotl. To accept Cortázar’s constructed logic in the text is to also accept the power of the fantastic in literature.

*Lo Otro*: The Other

Another similarity between these stories is the idea of displacement, which plays a key role in understanding each narrator’s response to confinement and, by extension, creates a sensation of “otherness” in each story. In “The Premature Burial,” the narrator finds himself away from his home, confined to a space that is

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21 Cortázar, 344.
not his prefabricated coffin. For this reason, the narrator is outside the normalcy of his life, and so he is an “other.” Cortázar’s protagonist similarly confronts both geographical and cultural displacement. The axolotl is exoticized and exhibited in Paris as a creature that is foreign to the city. If we use Cortázar’s biography as a way to explain the peculiarity of place in this story, Paris, then it can be presumed that the man is a native speaker of Spanish and most likely from a Latin American country. As a result, both the axolotl and the narrator find themselves away from their native homeland. There is a distancing that ultimately produces a sense of alienation. Poe’s protagonist is distanced from his home, where he had taken precautionary measures to ensure that he would not be buried alive. His comfort and security are lost once he gets on the boat for his trip, where he ends up stuck in a coffin-like space. In the case of Cortázar’s characters, the man and the axolotl are separated from their respective homes only to be (re)united in Paris. Thus, they are united in their “otherness,” their experience of being othered. Citing the inherent “otherness” of the axolotl, critic R. Lane Kauffman asserts,

En este contexto resulta significativo que el ajolote sea de origen mexicano, que sea un animal “ambiguo” ya que es anfibio, que sea nómada (también se encuentran ejemplares en África), que sea una forma larval (perpetuamente “subdesarrollada”) y que haya sido consumido y explotado por los europeos: antes se usaba como hígado de bacalao, por su valor terapéutico; ahora se encuentran estos ejemplares cautivos, objetos de curiosidad, en un acuario parisiño.

In this context it is significant that the axolotl is of Mexican origin, that it is an “ambiguous” animal because it is amphibious, that it is nomadic

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22 Cortázar was born in Brussels, Belgium to Argentine parents in 1914. By 1919 his family had returned to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Beginning in 1951, Cortázar lived and worked in Paris, France until his death there in 1984. See: Miguel Herráez, Julio Cortázar, Una Biografía Revisada (Barcelona: S.L. Editorial Alrevés, 2011), 25.
(examples are also found in Africa), that it is a larval form (perpetually “underdeveloped”) and that it has been consumed and exploited by the Europeans: previously used as cod liver, for its therapeutic value; now one finds these captive specimens, objects of curiosity, in a Parisian aquarium.

The ambiguity of the axolotl and its displacement construct this idea of the animal as being out of place, as being the other. The man-narrator also seems to recognize this inherent difference when he compares the eyes of the axolotls to those of the other fish, as I have previously cited. As Kauffman correctly points out, the axolotls are objects of curiosity because of their strangeness, and perhaps because of their anthropomorphic features. At the very least, the man-narrator is drawn to this innate difference and relates to the sensation of the other.

For Cortázar, the concept of lo otro is central to his conception of el relato fantástico. In “The Present State of Fiction in Latin America,” cited earlier, he explains,

The traces of writers such as Poe are undeniable on the deepest levels of many of my stories, and I think that without “Ligeia,” without “The Fall of the House of Usher,” I would not have found myself with this disposition toward the fantastic which assaul.ts me in the most unexpected moments and which propels me to write as the only way to cross over certain limits, to install myself in the territory of lo otro—the Other.24

The fantastic and the idea of the other are inherently linked according to Cortázar, and this connection, at least for him, is deeply grounded in Poe’s fiction. Using “The Premature Burial” as an example, the narrator’s fear is what turns him into the other, for he is incapable of controlling this anxiety until this terror is realized at the bottom of a ship. He is outside of his domain and is forced to confront that which has made him an outsider, an “other.” In “Axolotl,” the man-narrator is made

the other through his transformation as well as his inability to communicate, his lack of language. Alfred MacAdam, a Latin Americanist critic and translator, notes,

El cuento se transforma en una metáfora para la imposibilidad de la comunicación. Todos los seres, incluyendo a los hombres, estamos tan separados unos de otros que nunca podremos entendernos, a menos que podamos transformarnos en otra cosa, o como en este caso ‘visitar’ por un período la mente y la perspectiva de otro modo de ser… cómo en el mundo del hombre hay seres que lo ven todo de distinta manera y para quienes el mundo ‘significa’ otra cosa.\textsuperscript{25}

The story becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of communication. All beings, including humans, are so separated from each other that we can never understand each other, unless we can become something else or, as in this case, ‘visit’ for a time the mind and perspective of another way of being… how, in the world of humanity, there are beings who see everything differently and for those whom the world ‘means’ something else.

At the forefront of the othering process in Cortázar’s story is language and its untranslatability between beings, between humans and animals. Regardless of this impossibility on a linguistic level, Cortázar makes it possible for this translation to exist on another level, that of consciousness and of narration. For each story, the existence of an “other” facilitates the link between narrator and his exterior world.

“The Premature Burial” as subtext for “Axolotl”

The exclamation that Poe’s narrator makes with respect to life and death, “Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins,” serves as a parallel to the understanding of this translation from one body to another, from human to animal. With few narrational clues, the reader is forced to make this claim of where the man-narrator begins and the axolotl-narrator ends, if it can even be said that the two are distinguishable. This is one example of the way in which Poe’s story can

\textsuperscript{25} Alfred MacAdam, \textit{El individuo y el otro: Crítica a los cuentos de Julio Cortázar} (Buenos Aires, Argentina: La Librería, 1971), 101-2.
be read as a subtext for “Axolotl.” This relationship, to use a term coined by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, is known as transtextuality. Genette defines transtextuality as “namely, everything that brings it [a text] into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts,” which includes “intertextuality in the strict… sense.”26 Additionally, he divides transtextuality into five subsequent relational categories. Hypertextuality, being one of these five divisions of transtextuality, is defined as “any relationship uniting a text B […] [hypertext] to an earlier text A […] [hypotext], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.”27 This is useful for relational readings of texts, yet it is important to note that Genette’s conception of hypertextuality is temporal: the hypertext is linked to “an earlier” hypotext.

Employing these concepts, then, Cortázar’s “Axolotl” is the hypertext and Poe’s “The Premature Burial” is the hypotext. Cortázar’s use of the phrase “enterrado vivo” [buried alive], underscores this hypertextuality. How else can one reconcile such a specific phrase used in a seemingly out of place environment, an aquarium? With this, it is necessary to dive into the layers of a text, to explore its potential subtexts. This comparison is beneficial in that it unites these two texts despite having been written over a century apart in two different languages. In this comparison, I aim to highlight one possible reading of “Axolotl,” whereby Poe’s “The Premature Burial” serves as one way to link these two authors, beyond the

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fact that Cortázar translated his works and beyond Cortázar’s personal interest in Poe as a writer and theorist, *avant la lettre*, of *lo fantástico*. 
Chapter 2

Opening the Door onto a Literary Genre

In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe explains his creative process for arguably his most famous work, “The Raven.” Arguing that writers often feign a sort of inherent genius in the compositional process, Poe attempts to retrace the steps in his own creative process, with an emphasis on his deliberate choices with regards to length, topic, and theme. While this text is devoted to a poetical work, his conceptions of creation, authorship, and writing are certainly applicable to his short stories and his writings more broadly. Expanding on this idea, he writes,

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view... (emphasis mine)

According to Poe, the author hesitates at the idea of allowing glimpses into one’s literary processes of creation. Concepts, as he describes, alternate between complex and simple in the act of creation, but the “true purposes” of a literary creation are only realized “at the last moment,” when the author is able, or perhaps lucky enough, to recognize the formative structures of his or her work. Once the work is completed, these “glimpses,” however, are not exclusive to the author, for the

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1 “The Raven” was first published on January 29, 1845 in the New York Evening Mirror, a daily newspaper that was published in New York between 1844 and 1898. One year after publishing “The Raven,” Poe published his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” in the 1846 April issue of Graham’s Magazine of Literature and Art.

author’s job in creating a work of literature is to allow “the innumerable glimpses of the idea” to penetrate through the text and to reach the reader. Moreover, these ephemeral glimpses allow for a “maturity of full view,” where the summation of ideas present “behind the scenes” are manifested in a cohesive manner, uniting to form the work.

For Cortázar, the term glimpse is also an all important one, as he uses it to describe his relationship to the fantastic, as if it were something to be seen or something physically attainable. In 1976, he addressed his relationship to fantastic literature in his “The Present State of Fiction in Latin America,” emphasizing, “I have always felt that the fantastic does not appear in a harsh or direct way, that it is not cutting, but rather that it presents itself in a way which we could call interstitial, slipping between two moments or two acts in order to allow us to catch a glimpse, in the binary mechanism which is typical of human reason…” (emphasis mine).³ With this sentiment, Cortázar expands upon Poe’s conception of the writing process, likening Poe’s idea of “the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought” to an interstitial space, where these ideas, or for Cortázar, lo fantástico, gather for the author to catch a fleeting glimpse. The ideas for a story do not present themselves fully, according to Cortázar, and in this way, to use Poe’s vocabulary, arrive as immature concepts, that is, not fully formed, but present, nonetheless. With this presence, then, the author is capable of glimpsing at a literary creation at its moment of conception. In multiple essays, Cortázar likens this philosophy of creation to one standing in a hallway, where doors are slightly ajar, offering a

fleeting chance at viewing the fantastic. This hallway is a space where the writer’s and, by extension, the reader’s reality, what I am going to call lo real, meet the fantastic, if only momentarily. As Cortázar states, the fantastic offers a reality that is difficult to comprehend: “In most cases that eruption of the unknown does not go beyond a terribly brief and fleeting sensation that there is a meaning, an open door toward a reality which offers itself to us but which, sadly, we are not capable of apprehending.”4 However, these glimpses are what allow both author and reader to make a step toward “apprehending” another reality.

Analogizing Poe’s notion of a “behind the scenes” to a hallway, Cortázar spatializes the creative process with respect to the fantastic, where the hallway is a place that allows an author to essentially find an idea, or in his case, catch a glimpse of the fantastic: “There are people who at a certain time cease to be themselves and their circumstances, there is a moment when you want to be both yourself and something unexpected, yourself and the moment when the door, which before and after opens onto the hallway, opens slowly to show us the field where the unicorn sings.”5 The idea of the hallway can also be applied to Poe’s stories, which sheds light on the ways in which a reader can better understand Poe by way of Cortázar. I will return to the significance of the hallway in my discussion of Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” and later with regards to Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” For now, suffice to say that these two authors focus on the ephemerality of ideas and concepts in the process of writing.

4 Cortázar, 526.
Julio Cortázar is undeniably linked with the subgenre of the fantastic—lo fantástico or la literatura fantástica in Spanish. His work, more often than not, is an exploration of realities not so dissimilar from lo real, yet ones that “swerve,” to borrow a term from critic Harold Bloom, to a lesser or greater degree away from lo real. The presence of lo fantástico is especially present in his collections of short stories Bestiario (1951) and Final del juego (1956). “Axolotl,” as I explored in the previous chapter, is an apt example of this “swerve” from reality. Another story that is particularly emblematic of Cortázar’s preference for the fantastic is “Casa tomada,” which was published in Bestiario. For the characters in “Casa tomada,” an unknown being or entity forces a brother and sister to seek shelter within their own home until they are ultimately forced out. In this chapter I will use “Casa tomada” not only as an emblem of lo fantástico in Cortázar’s works, but also as a way into reading Gothic literature as a precursor to fantastic literature. Additionally, to continue the theme of “otherness” from the previous chapter, I will explore the relationship between lo otro and el relato fantástico in “Casa tomada.” Just as much as that story is indebted to the fantastic, so too is it linked with the Gothic literary tradition. To bridge these two literary genres, I will discuss “Casa tomada” alongside Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (hereafter “The Fall”).

The Gothic as Predecessor to Lo fantástico

Before beginning an exploration of the relationship between “Casa tomada” and “The Fall,” it is useful to summarize definitions of fantastic literature.

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6 Literary critic Harold Bloom uses this term in his article “Clinamen: Towards a Theory of Fantasy” to describe a move or a step toward a definition of the fantastic in literature. See Bridges to Fantasy, eds. George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, and Robert Scholes (Cardondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 1.
According to literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic has three required conditions:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of the living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role so to speak is entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations.7

As Todorov posits, in fantastic literature a balance between the laws that govern a certain reality, mainly that of lo real, and the sensory perceptions of the characters involved. One or the other has to give in order for this “hesitation” to exist, since a disconnection from either the laws or the senses allows a character, and by extension the reader, to grasp the fantastical elements of a situation. Speaking of his own short stories in “Algunos aspectos del cuento” [1970; Some Aspects of the Short Story], Cortázar describes his understanding of the fantastic,

Casi todos los cuentos que he escrito pertenecen al género llamado fantástico por falta de mejor nombre, y se oponen a ese falso realismo que consiste en creer que todas las cosas pueden describirse y explicarse como lo daba por sentado el optimismo filosófico y científico del siglo XVIII, es decir, dentro de un mundo regido más o menos armoniosamente por un sistema de leyes, de principios, de relaciones de causa y efecto, de psicologías definidas, de geografía bien cartografiadas.8

Almost all of the stories that I have written belong to the genre called fantastic, for lack of a better term, and they oppose this false realism that consists in believing that all things can be described and explained by the philosophical and scientific optimism that was taken for granted in the eighteenth century, that is to say, within a rigid world more or less harmonious through a system of laws, of principles, of relations of cause and effect, of defined psychologies, of well-mapped geography.

This false realism, I would argue is the same balance of the natural and supernatural explanations, as Todorov explains. The fantastic, at its core, is based on *lo real*, as it occupies the same space as the reader’s reality, outside the world of the text. The falsity of this reality is present when the disconnect occurs, the fantastical event or occurrence does not align “within a rigid world more or less harmonious through a system of laws, of principles, of relations of cause and effect, of defined psychologies, of well-mapped geography.” In a reality built on explanations, the lack thereof introduces both the character(s) and the reader to a sensory illusion difficult to comprehend. Of Poe’s relationship to the fantastic, Todorov asserts,

Thus the fantastic is ultimately excluded from “The Fall of the House of Usher.” As a rule, we do not find the fantastic in Poe’s works, in the strict sense, with the exception of “The Black Cat.” His tales almost all derive their effect from the uncanny, and several from the marvelous. Yet Poe remains very close to the authors of the fantastic both in his themes and in the techniques that he applies.9

Notably, Todorov does not cite any Latin American authors as examples of the fantastic, despite the fact that the Latin American literary “boom” took place ten to fifteen years prior to his writing this book. Cortázar, of course, had been employing *lo fantástico* in his work since the early 1950s. Regardless, it is now widely held that Cortázar is not only a fantastic author, but also one of the leading figures in the genre, especially in Hispanic literatures. As Todorov rightly asserts, Poe is not a fantastic author himself, although he influenced many of the authors belonging to that genre.

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9 Todorov, 48.
Poe’s Stage Set

To begin with the Gothic as a groundwork for lo fantástico, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” continues the classic Gothic trope of the unsettling presence of a house established in Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto. In Poe’s story, the narrator arrives at the House of Usher, after receiving news in a letter from his longtime friend, Roderick Usher, explaining that he has fallen ill and is in need of help. The narrator’s description of the house begins poignantly, emphasizing the feelings which the building elicits, when he labels the building “the melancholy House of Usher.” Sensing such a powerfully physical and emotional presence from the house, the narrator begins not with a description of Roderick and his ailment, but rather his first impressions of the house: “I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable doom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible” (emphasis mine). This first “glimpse” of the house provokes such a profound reaction by the narrator that he is overcome by an inexplicable fear, one that will parallel his fear of Roderick’s current state. Moreover, just as “the glimpses of idea” in “Philosophy of

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10 Published in 1764, Walpole’s novel features the castle as a prominent presence beyond just a setting. Moreover, in the release of the second addition, Walpole added the term “Gothic” as a subtitle: “A Gothic Story,” which is considered to be one of the first instances where the term gothic was used to describe a literary text. Although not a castle, Poe uses a mansion as the setting for his story, but the house is also personified not only through the narrator’s descriptions, but also through the Usher’s relationship to the mansion. See the “Introduction” to The Castle of Otranto. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii-xxxiii.


12 Poe, 199.
Composition” serve to give the author insight into his or her literary creation, so too does this glimpse of the house give both the narrator and the reader a perception of the relationship between Roderick and his dilapidated house. In other words, the decrepit state of the house foreshadows the frail mental states of its owners. Although the narrator, at this point, is unaware of the situation within the house, he notices “a barely perceptible fissure,” which runs down the side of the house.\(^\text{13}\) This crack will mirror the fragility of the brother and sister, ultimately ending in the destruction of the mansion along the line of this fissure.

There is a connection between the house and the family lineage, both of which are failing to survive. Explaining that the Usher family lineage has remained “in the direct line of descent,” the narrator begins the parallel between the physical house and the family lineage, known as the House of Usher, which now only belongs to Roderick and his sister, Madeline.\(^\text{14}\) Due to the repeated incest in an attempt to maintain a pure lineage, the last remaining Ushers, who are twin siblings, are left with severe medical conditions that have seriously harmed both their mental and physical states. Roderick suffers from a malady which prevents him from being able to listen to music without feeling uneasy, among other symptoms, and Madeline experiences a partial catalepsy that renders her seemingly deceased. The dichotomy of “otherness” and “sameness” becomes more apparent as the narrator learns more about their respective illnesses and as he becomes more aware of the unnerving similarities between the siblings and the house. For one, the narrator, much like the reader, is the other, as he enters both a space and a family dynamic.

\(^{13}\) Poe, 202.

\(^{14}\) Poe, 200.
that are entirely unfamiliar to him. The house and the siblings’ relationship, as clear parallels, feed off each other, amplifying the sensations that the narrator feels both in their presence and within the house. Once the narrator enters the property he passes through “the Gothic archway of the hall,” which not only frames the house architecturally, but also, more broadly, calls attention to the genre of the story.\textsuperscript{15} Importantly, the narrator enters the space or, to use Poe’s phrase from the “Philosophy of Composition,” “peep[s] behind the scenes” of the Usher family dynamic, through a framing device that positions both the story itself and the siblings in a specific tradition, both architectural and literary.

In addition to the narrator’s view of the house, the act of seeing and being seen is key to the relationships between each of the characters. Not knowing Madeline personally, the narrator only catches a “glimpse” of her as she passes by while he and Roderick discuss the brother’s fear that he should lose his sister, leaving him the last remaining Usher in the family. To further the notion that Madeline is also intimately connected with the house, the narrator describes his feeling after watching her walk by in a way that mirrors his reactions to the house when he first arrived: “I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread—and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings.”\textsuperscript{16} Additionally, the first time the narrator sees Madeline is also the last, as he explains, “I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain—that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no

\textsuperscript{15} Poe, 202.
\textsuperscript{16} Poe, 204.
This confession comes after Roderick and the narrator discuss the effect of the house on the siblings. This influence on the siblings is what ultimately drives their illnesses, causes Madeline’s death, and the destruction of the house. Falling deeper into hysteria, Roderick later confesses to the narrator that he considers the mansion to not only have an influence but to also be alive: “Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen, he said, (and I here started as he spoke,) in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls.” This concern for the “sentience” of the house highlights Roderick’s hypersensitivity to sound and to his sister’s condition.

After essentially assigning a degree of autonomy or agency to the house, Roderick exclaims “that the lady Madeleine was no more,” which strips her of her own sentience and agency. Thus, Madeline’s presence is superseded by the influence and apparent sentience of the house, an influence that continues to grow until the narrator also begins to feel the effects. The mansion, then, I would argue, transforms the narrator from the other to a member of the household insofar as he begins to act and sense as if he is afflicted with Roderick’s malady. That is not to say that the narrator becomes an Usher, but rather that the house’s influence extends beyond the Usher family. As he describes, however, this influence is not simply a result of the house but also of Roderick’s delusions: “I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his fantastic yet impressive superstitions.”

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17 Poe, 205.
18 Poe, 209.
20 Poe, 212.
The spatiality of the Usher house becomes important and more prominent once the two men place Madeline’s body in a vault beneath the house. For one, the vault in which her body was placed as a temporary entombment is directly beneath the narrator’s bedroom. Aware of her catalytic fits, Roderick is weary of claiming Madeline to be deceased, so he decides to place her, temporarily, in the vault so as to prove that she is in fact dead. However, as is apparent in the end, Madeleine was alive, and Roderick ignored the signs that she had woken. The large iron door to the vault acts as a threshold between life and death, where Madeline’s body on the other side of a static room represents death and Roderick’s ability to freely move about the mansion represents life. Speaking of the corpse and of death, the narrator describes, “Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unawed.”

The two men are characterized by their ability to actively look, to take a glimpse beyond life and to experience the result of death on the other side of the iron door, in other words, “behind the scenes.” However, as becomes apparent through unusual sounds reverberating throughout the house, Madeline was in fact buried alive, and just as Roderick suffered from over-sensitive hearing, the narrator seemingly inherits this hyperawareness and becomes increasingly obsessed with the noises that move about the house. Finally, Roderick shouts, “We have put her living in the tomb!” Emerging from the vault at the threshold of the vault door, which can also be read as the threshold between life and death, Madeline stands momentarily only to fall onto her brother as they both die. With the house crumbling along the lines of the fissure, the narrator flees the House of Usher as its

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21 Poe, 211.
22 Poe, 215.
walls fall in on itself: “my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder… and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher.’”

For Poe, the house is both a place of union and of division. Through their shared lineage, Roderick and Madeline are united to each other and to the mansion, which is a representation of the age of the Usher family, extending back generations. At the same time, however, the interior of the house divides the characters spatially. Roderick, Madeline, and the narrator each occupy their own bedrooms; Madeline never enters the common space that Roderick and the narrator share when reading; and Madeline’s seemingly dead corpse is removed entirely from the living spaces, placed in a vault. These divisions will become useful when reading Cortázar’s “Casa tomada.” For now, it will suffice to emphasize the spatial compartmentalization of the House of Usher and the ways in which the characters interact with the mansion as if it were alive, as if it were a character itself.

El relato fantástico: “Casa Tomada”

In the scholarship dedicated to the relationship between these two authors, Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” and Poe’s “The Fall” are often cited not only to investigate Poe’s influence on Cortázar, but also to trace the translation of the tropes, themes and motifs found in gothic literature to the subgenre of fantastic literature. Scholars have been quick to note the glaring similarities between the two stories: the collapsing of a family lineage, the importance of noise and sound, the

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23 Poe, 216.
brother and sister dynamic, and the presence of incestuous unions or desires. The house in “Casa tomada” has a similar, if not more apparent, authority in the life of the siblings. While the House of Usher is personified through the narrator’s descriptions and though its relationship to the siblings, Cortázar’s house is quite literally characterized by its ability to control the owners’ access to the interior of the house. The siblings describe their house as if it were alive, which results in their position as the other after the house ultimately forces them out.

Just as Poe frames the physical house as a representation of a family lineage, Cortázar’s characters have inherited this mansion near Buenos Aires, Argentina. This inheritance is significant because the house has preserved their familial history. The story begins not with a physical description of the house, but rather the narrator explains that the house preserves a family history: “Nos gustaba la casa porque aparte de espaciosa y antigua (hoy que las casas antiguas sucumben a la más ventajosa liquidación de sus materiales) guardaba los recuerdos de nuestros bisabuelos, el abuelo paterno, nuestros padres y toda la infancia” [We liked the house because apart from it being spacious and old (today the old houses succumb to the most advantageous liquidation of their materials) it saved the memories of our great-grandparents, our paternal grandfather, our parents, and all of our infancy]. Preserving the memories of deceased family members, the house is described almost as if it were a tomb. Through these saved memories, the mansion

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is alive with a particular familial past that resonates with the current tenants. The narrator and his sister, Irene, are both in their mid-forties and unmarried. Attributing their marital status to the house, the narrator explains, “A veces llegamos a creer que era ella [la casa] la que no nos dejó casarnos” [Sometimes we come to believe that she [the house] was the one who did not let us get married].²⁶ Here, the residence is not only personified, but is also described as an influential entity in the lives of the siblings, controlling their relationships.²⁷ Irene and the narrator share an intimate connection with the house both through a shared family lineage and through a seemingly ritualistic approach to cleaning the house each day. “Pero es de la casa que me interesa hablar,” expresses the narrator, “de la casa y de Irene, porque yo no tengo importancia” [But it’s the house that I am interested in talking about, the house and Irene, because I’m not of any importance].²⁸ In this way, the narrator shifts the emphasis from the brother and sister to the effects the house has on the siblings.

The description of the interior of the house is essential in comprehending not only the layout but also the ways in which the narrator and Irene are able to interact with the multitude of rooms.²⁹ Because of its crucial significance, I find it necessary to cite the description in its entirety:

Cómo no acordarme de la distribución de la casa. El comedor, una sala con gobelinos, la biblioteca y tres dormitorios grandes quedaban en la parte más retirada, la que mira hacia Rodríguez Peña. Solamente un pasillo con su

²⁶ Cortázar, 113.
²⁷ The narrator explains that Irene had two suitors whom she turned away. He was engaged to a woman named María Ester who died before the two were married. As a result, the siblings are both left single.
²⁸ Cortázar, 114.
²⁹ Various fans of Cortázar have created maps, depicting the layout of the house. One such example can be found using the following link: http://cuentosencuarto.blogspot.com/2015/11/casa-tomada-plano.html

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maciza puerta de roble aislaba esa parte del ala delantera donde había un baño, la cocina, nuestros dormitorios y el living central, al cual comunicaban los dormitorios y el pasillo. Se entraba a la casa por un zaguán con mayólica, y la puerta cancel daba al living. De manera que uno entraba por el zaguán, abría la cancel y pasaba al living; tenía a los lados las puertas de nuestros dormitorios, y al frente el pasillo que conducía a la parte más retirada; avanzando por el pasillo se franqueaba la puerta de roble y más allá empezaba el otro lado de la casa, o bien se podía girar a la izquierda justamente antes de la puerta y seguir por un pasillo más estrecho que llevaba a la cocina y al baño. Cuando la puerta estaba abierta advertía uno que la casa era muy grande; si no, daba la impresión de un departamento de los que se edifican ahora, apenas para moverse; Irene y yo vivíamos siempre en esta parte de la casa, casi nunca íbamos más allá de la puerta de roble, salvo para hacer la limpieza, pues es increíble cómo se junta tierra en los muebles.30

How am I not going to remember the distribution of the house. The dining room, a room with Gobelin tapestries, the library and three large bedrooms were in the most secluded part, which looks toward Rodríguez Peña Street. Only one hallway with its solid oak door isolated that part of the front wing where there was a bathroom, the kitchen, our bedrooms and the living room, which connected the bedrooms and the hallway. One entered the house through a vestibule with tiling, and the inner door opened to the living room; our bedroom doors were on either side, and the front of the hallway connected to the most remote part; advancing down the hallway one passed through the oak door and beyond that began the other side of the house, or one could turn left just before the door and follow a narrower hallway leading to the kitchen and bathroom. When the door was open it warned one that the house was very large; if not, it gave the impression of an apartment of those that are built now, barely able to move around; Irene and I always lived in this part of the house, we almost never went beyond the oak door, except to clean, well it is incredible how the ground joins the furniture.

The spatial organization of the house as well as the sheer size allows for the divisions that follow as an unknown entity slowly and methodically takes over various portions of the house. Firstly, however, the major hallway that extends from the entrance to the other end of the house facilitates movement and, invoking Cortázar’s “glimpses,” allows for distinct interpretations of the space. The narrator recognizes this fact when he notes, “When the door was open it warned one that the

30 Cortázar, 114-5.
house was very large; if not, it gave the impression of an apartment of those that are built now.” These shifting spatial perceptions mirror the ways in which one can interpret the view of a door slightly ajar, offering a preview of lo fantástico. The entity that appears after this description takes control of the space and by doing so, limits not only where the siblings can live, but also what they can see, what they can access.

In “The Fall,” the narrator similarly describes the effects the house has on his sight and on his ability to perceive the space: “the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recessed of the vaulted and fretted ceiling.” In both cases, then, the space dictates the visual field and by extension controls the characters’ perceptions of their surroundings. The main hallway in “Casa tomada” links each of the rooms while at the same time allowing this mysterious presence to control certain sections of the mansion. Additionally, the narrator makes a clear distinction between spaces, explaining, “Irene and I always lived in this part of the house, we almost never went beyond the oak door, except to clean,” which demonstrates that the narrator and his sister also divided the house themselves, reserving certain spaces for living while others remained unoccupied. This type of division is also present in the Usher mansion, where the crypt is a space of death and the upper levels are spaces of life, at least until Madeline awakes from her cataleptic fit. When Madeline enters the living space, she essentially brings the presence of death with her, which results in the ultimate destruction of the house. Within the Usher house, the divisions are made between

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31 Poe, 202.
life and death, while in “Casa tomada,” the family mansion is divided into habitable and inhabitable spaces, until the entire house becomes inhabitable.

Although the narrator and Irene remain mostly in one section of the house, the appearance of a being or entity—perhaps it is the house itself—methodically inhibits access to certain parts of the mansion. Just as a dull yet persistent sound alerts Roderick and the narrator to Madeline’s “resurrection,” the narrator in “Casa tomada” first hears a noise that alerts him to a visitant: “El sonido venía imprecisamente y sordo, como un volcarse de silla sobre la alfombra o un ahogado susurro de conversación” [The sound came imprecisely and dull, like a chair tipping over onto the rug or the muffled whisper of a conversation]. This noise warns the narrator of an unwelcomed entity and he quickly locks the door, sectioning off himself and Irene. He explains to Irene, “Han tomado la parte del fondo” [They have taken over the back part]. Not only does the narrator personify this entity, but he also believes it to be a collective of some sorts, multiple beings, as he conjugates the verb as a plural subject—they. “They” continue to take over parts of the house and the siblings are forced into various rooms, and each time a room was lost to the entity, the siblings were left with fewer personal belongings. For example, the narrator explains how he has a passion for French literature, and the library was one of the first rooms to be taken over, so he had to resort to reordering his father’s stamp collection. Irene, on the other hand, occupies herself by knitting various articles of clothing and she carries yarn with her as the two siblings move about the house.

32 Cortázar, 115.
33 Cortázar, 116.
In a parallel to Madeline Usher, Irene also talks in her sleep, which frightens the narrator and adds to the reverberating sounds within the mansion. Describing this phenomenon, the narrator states, “Cuando Irene soñaba en voz alta yo me desvelaba enseguida… voz que viene de los sueños y no de la garganta” [Whenever Irene talked in her sleep, I woke up immediately… a voice that comes from dreams and not from the throat].\(^{34}\) While Madeline is presumed dead, her faint voice and scratching alert the male characters to her awakened state. Similarly, Irene talking in her sleep accentuates the existence of an “other” in the house. Although the narrator recognizes her voice, he is still hyper-sensitive to noise, as that is what triggered his realization of the entity’s existence. “Pero de noche,” adds the narrator, “se escuchaba cualquier cosa en la casa” [But at night you could hear anything in the house].\(^{35}\) Both Roderick and the narrator in “Casa tomada” suffer from an acute sense of hearing that is brought on as a result of their respective houses. As the awareness of sound intensifies, so too does the presence of the mansion in the daily lives of the siblings. As stated earlier, Roderick’s aversion to sound is translated to the narrator, who also becomes increasingly paranoid about the sounds in the house. Irene and her brother use the sounds as evidence as to where “they” are within in the house.

The noises, then, in “Casa tomada,” signal a distinction between the habitable and inhabitable spaces, until ultimately the entire house is taken over. These sounds, although referred to as “they,” come from within the house, and perhaps come from the house itself. If this is the case, I would argue that the

\(^{34}\) Cortázar, 117.

\(^{35}\) Cortázar, 117.
mansion is reclaiming itself, reclaiming its authority. As the sounds spread throughout the house, the narrator recognizes the encroaching presence: “Nos quedamos escuchando los ruidos, notando claramente que eran de este lado de la puerta de roble, en la cocina y el baño, o en el pasillo mismo donde empezaba el codo casi al lado nuestro” [We were listening to the noises, clearly noting that they were from this side of the oak door, in the kitchen and the bathroom, or in the hallway itself at the bend almost on our side]. These reverberations can be read as a form of communication, and in this way the house alerts the siblings not only of its animate consciousness, but also of its aim to reclaim itself.

Eventually, the mansion does in fact reclaim its authority, as the structure physically forces the siblings out. In doing so, the otherness shifts from the entity that occupies the house to the siblings, who are no longer residents of their family household. Walking out of the door and onto the street, the narrator notes, “Antes de alejarnos tuve lastima, cerré bien la puerta de entrada y tiré la llave a la alcantarilla” [Before we left I felt sorry, I closed the front door tightly and threw the key down the sewer]. Although the house is not razed to the ground as it is in “The Fall,” access to the mansion in “Casa tomada” is restricted, resulting in a human-less environment, where “they” are in complete charge of the house. In other words, if “they” is read as the house itself, then it has claimed control and authority over the environment without human intervention. In both stories, the end of the family lineage is represented through the destruction and abandonment of the

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36 Cortázar, 118.
37 Cortázar, 118.
property. Thus, this separation signals an end to a symbiotic relationship between family and house.

The presence of *lo fantástico* in “Casa tomada” is subtle, as the entity is never described beyond the noises it makes and the fact that the narrator refers to the presence as “they.” The ambiguity of whatever is in the house mirrors the ambiguous nature of fantastic literature. In what ways does the fantastic present itself? And how does *lo fantástico* manifest itself and to what degree, specifically in Cortázar’s works? In the essay cited earlier, in which he develops his conception of the “glimpses,” Cortázar also elucidates the connection between dreaming and the fantastic, as he explains how the idea for the story came to him in a dream:

> I have seen this phenomenon put to the test many times with an old story of mine entitled “The House Taken Over,” which I dreamed with all the details which figure in the text and which I wrote upon jumping out of bed, still enveloped in the horrible nausea of its ending. That story, which I can say without false modesty does not seem very extraordinary to me, has nonetheless been reproduced in numerous languages and continues to fascinate its readers. This leads me to suggest that if the fantastic sometimes invades us in full light of day, it is also waiting for us in that oneiric territory in which, perhaps, we have more things in common than when we are awake.\(^{38}\)

Essentially, he argues that a connection exists between dreams and *lo fantástico*, where dreams serve as the gateway or the door left ajar that allows for a fleeting glimpse of another world. For “Casa tomada,” Cortázar was able “to carry the content of the dreams into words,” so as to capture the fantastic from a dream-like state and effectively translate it into a readable text. The subtlety of Cortázar’s employment of the fantastic in a story like “Casa tomada” deals also with the story’s relatability. Other than the “they” that occupies the house, the story deals primarily

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with *lo real*. This uncertain presence pulls the story toward a reality unknown to the reader; however, the fantastic is based on *lo real*, diverging ever so slightly. It is this divergence, that is the existence of an unknown entity, that intrigues the reader, as the author himself mentions.

The Gothic House

The family mansion in each story sets the stage for the *denouement*, in which each family lineage is subsequently lost as a result of the loss or destruction of the house. As noted earlier, this trope of the house is a particularly Gothic one, which Cortázar adopts in his fantastic interpretation. Of his childhood relationship to the fantastic and Gothic, Cortázar recalls,

> For me, in the beginning, the fantastic was an incessant producer of fear more than of marvel. My house, to begin with, was a gothic stage set, not because of its architecture, but because of the accumulation of terrors which were born from things and from beliefs, from the *badly-lit hallways* and from the after-dinner conversations of the grown-ups. They were simple people; their readings and their superstitions permeated an *ill-defined reality*.³⁹ (emphasis mine)

With these terrors which come from “the badly-lit hallways,” the house becomes an agent first of the Gothic, and then, with the addition of the “ill-defined reality,” *lo fantástico*. For Cortázar then, *lo fantástico* was born out of the Gothic, where the “stage set” created an atmosphere of terror, and the superstitions served to move his relationship to his house from a Gothic one to a fantastic one, where the line between *lo real* and this “ill-defined reality” blurred, producing marvel. Connecting this back to Poe, specifically Cortázar’s translations of his stories, a few questions arise. How does the Argentine translate these tropes from one literary genre to

³⁹ Cortázar, 523-4.
another? To what degree does he maintain them and to what extent does he adapt them to specifically redefine lo fantástico? In this case, translation is not linguistic, but rather stylistic, and just like in linguistic translations, adaptations, additions, and subtractions of style are inevitable. With this comparison between “Casa tomada” and “The Fall,” the image of the house becomes the central figure in which lo fantástico and lo gótico converge, so as to highlight a translation of style from one genre to the next. Translation, for Cortázar, exists outside of language boundaries and extends into the realm of literary influence.
Chapter 3

Author and Translator United through Language

Throughout Cortázar’s literary career, translation was at the forefront of his work, as he began working as a translator and later had his own works translated. This intimate relationship between translator, author, and language ties Cortázar and Poe together in a unique way. These acts of translation led Cortázar to a profound understanding of the inherent link not only between literature and language, but also between author and translator. Bridging this gap, by being both an author and a translator, Cortázar offers insights that are invaluable to comprehending the connection between two authors from different time periods and different countries, writing in different languages.

In this chapter, my aim is to highlight Cortázar’s relationship to translating and being translated so as to demonstrate the role language—particularly diction and tone—plays in connecting these two authors. Clearly Cortázar was influenced by Poe. However, it is equally accurate to say that Poe influences our reading of Cortázar. In other words, Poe serves as one possible entry way into reading Cortázar’s short stories. For example, when reading “Casa tomada,” it becomes almost instinctual to recall “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Yet, I believe it beneficial and useful to reverse this formula: to use Cortázar as a starting point in reading Poe. Ultimately, my goal is to demonstrate that influence need not be understood as chronologically linear, but rather that, in this case, Poe can be and should be read through Cortázar. This reading of Poe could be based on Cortázar’s short stories, his translations of Poe, and perhaps most importantly, his essays on
Poe. Through Cortázar’s own reflections on translation and Poe, I will work toward a broad definition of translation and apply these concepts to his relationship to Poe’s short stories.

In arguing that Poe should be read through Cortázar, thus allowing for influence to be circular, rather than linear, I will cite his essay “Notas sobre lo gótico en el Río de la Plata” (1975; “Notes on the Gothic in the River Plate Region”). Published originally in a French literary journal titled Cahiers du Monde Hispanique et Luso-Brésilien (Hispanic and Portuguese-Brazilian Notebooks), this essay offers an interpretation as to why Gothic literature has had such a potent and prominent life in parts of Argentina and Uruguay. This essay is useful for Cortázar scholars as it illuminates his personal relationship to the Gothic literary movement. Employing Poe as a representative of Gothic literature, Cortázar discusses not only his relation to this genre, but also makes mention of various rioplatense authors who are indebted to this same literature. Moreover, for Poe scholars, this essay offers a glimpse into Poe’s wide-reaching influence, and how his stories might have penetrated so deeply into the literary culture of this region. In my research, I did not find an English translation of this essay.\(^1\) For this reason, I offer an English translation of this important essay in order to contribute to Poe and Cortázar scholarship. Since this one essay serves as such a powerful connection between these authors, my English translation will hopefully add not only to the scholarship

\(^1\) It is entirely plausible that an English translation of this essay does in fact exist. If this is the case, my hope is that my translation will nonetheless further enrich the literary criticism dedicated to Poe and Cortázar through the lens of translation studies, which does not approach translation as an end-driven process. Put differently, even if there is another prior translation of this essay, I find that my own experience translating this piece has given me a new perspective on the interconnectedness of literary theory and criticism grounded in translation studies.
of each author, but also to scholarship devoted to the intimate link between *lo gótico* and *lo fantástico*. My translation is added as an appendix, which is followed by a coda where I detail my translation process.

**A Trajectory of Translation**

Throughout his career, Cortázar translated texts and had his own works translated, which had a profound impact on the ways in which he interacted with and produced works of literature. In a 1966 interview with Luis Harss, a Chilean author and translator, Cortázar describes the relationship between author, language, and translator:

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

Importantly, Cortázar makes a distinction between language and “the language of translation.” The latter, as he states, reduces the literary style to a “common denominator.” Speaking specifically about Argentina and feeling as though the country, at this time, did not have an exportable or translatable literary tradition, Cortázar believed this to be a fault partly because of “the bad influence of foreign translations.” In this way, then, translation not only shapes the way people read authors of other languages, but it also greatly influences the ways in which authors write in their own languages. In other words, Argentine authors, according to Cortázar, had not yet found their voice nor their style through the use of their own

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language, but rather, they had been emulating poor translations of outside literary works. Translation as an act of reduction to a common denominator strips away any style that is or had been unique to a specific region or country. Just as language is unique to a certain nation, so too is literary style distinctive to that same nation. Because language is inherently linked to literature and literary traditions, Cortázar was arguing that in translating a text from one language to another, to some degree, the opportunity for cultivating one’s own style is diminished, compromised. This loss is the reason why “bad influence[s] of translations,” in Cortázar’s opinion, so plagued Argentine authors, as they were not reading the original author’s intended style, but rather in a style all but reduced by another language.

Establishing a hierarchy of national literary traditions, Cortázar adds, “In a country where there’s a real literary tradition, where literature reflects the evolution of language, as might be the case in Spain, France, Germany or the United States, there evidently writers work with a sense of inherited responsibility.”3 This sense is contingent on an established literary tradition, which has a history that demonstrates a development both of literary styles and language. As a result, authors feel a sense of pride coupled with “inherited responsibility” to build on that history. Cortázar continues, “They have an acute sense of style, a well-trained ear, and high formal standards. In Argentina we have none of this.”4 All of these attributes stem from a command of language that is based on style, meaning the author recognizes that literary style and use of language are inseparable. For Cortázar, translation separates these two aspects of a work, and in doing so alienates

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3 Harss, 51.
4 Harss, 51.
the reader, as he or she loses the intended or original sense of a text. This is not to say that translation is necessarily bad, just that with respect to a unified literary tradition in Argentina, translations of foreign texts had hindered such an expression and union of style and language.

Now, it is important to note that this interview is from 1966, relatively early in Cortázar’s literary career. Fifteen years later he would clarify just what he meant by a “common denominator,” in what I would argue is the essence of his relationship to translating and being translated. In a 1981 interview with translator Dan Wohlfeiler, Cortázar expressed the crux of his relationship to translation. Responding to the question, “You once told Louis [sic.] Harss that translation was an act of reduction to a common denominator. What do you think of Gregory Rabassa’s translations of your own work into English?” Cortázar responded,

I’ve translated a number of literary works, and I’ve earned my living as a translator, so it’s a trade that I know. What I must have told Harss was that, basically, a translation is always an approximation—sometimes a very close approximation to the original, and sometimes not. The perfect translation doesn’t exist, because even when in an objective sense a sentence is perfectly translated from one language to another, each of the sentence’s components, each of its words, had intuitive meanings, different connotations in the two languages, so the result is never the same. One can translate the meaning of a sentence into Spanish, and objectively it will be accurate. But when one then analyzes the interior, the deepest content of the sentence, no translator in the world can find an exact equivalent.

As Cortázar describes, approximation is the key term with regards to translation, since a translation is tangentially related to the original. As he states, “the perfect

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5 Gregory Rabassa was an American translator, who worked closely with Cortázar in translating his works from Spanish into English. The two became very good friends as a result.
6 This is in reference to the same interview previously cited, “Julio Cortázar, or the Slap in the Face,” in which Cortázar claims translation to be a reduction.
translation doesn’t exist,” for “connotations” are lost, the flow of the original language falls to the wayside, and linguistic nuances are rendered nonexistent, in the hopes of conveying the broader picture of the text as a whole, not necessarily the minutiae of each individual component of a sentence or paragraph. Although on the whole a translation can be accurate, “the interior, the deepest content” cannot be easily replicated, if at all, as Cortázar notes. Furthermore, it seems as though approximation approaches an equivalent, yet as no “perfect translation” exists and by extension no exact equivalent exists, the translator’s aim, then, is to bring this approximation as close to equivalency as possible, knowing full well that it is not attainable. As an exploration of linguistic relationships, translation serves as a unifier of author and translator. The author is tasked with creation, whereas the translator is tasked with exploring language with regards to the source language and the target language. This delicate balance is contingent upon knowledge that the end goal is an approximation and not a copy.

Clarifying just what he meant by a “common denominator,” Cortázar gets to the heart of translation in this passage, explaining that this reduction is intrinsically connected to the act of translation insofar as the translator, in his or her attempts to convey a coherent understanding of a given text, must accept that the best translation is relatively “better” in relation to “bad influence[s] of foreign translation,” to cite Cortázar. In doing so, the translator is certainly capable of maintaining overall significance, yet is unable to preserve all “intuitive meanings.” Moreover, objectivity and subjectivity are closely tied to translation, not just according to Cortázar, but also in general. He explains that a sentence may be
translated perfectly in the objective sense, which is to say that the meaning of the sentence, the concept that the sentence is conveying, can be translated. However, the nuances in phrases, the uniqueness of differences among languages make the exact equivalent an impossibility. As a result, there exists something inherently untranslatable in any language, and this is the inherent shortcoming with translation, according to Cortázar. The concept of untranslatability stems from Walter Benjamin’s 1923 essay “The Task of the Translator,” in which he posits,

> The extent to which a translation manages to be in keeping with the nature of this form is determined objectively by the translatability of the original. The lower the quality and distinction of its language, the greater the extent to which its information, the less fertile a field it is for translations, until the utter preponderance of content, far from being the lever for a well-formed translation, renders it impossible. The higher the level of a work, the more it remains translatable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly. This, of course, applies to originals only. Translations, in contrast, prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty but because of the looseness with which meaning attached to them.\(^8\)

Here, Benjamin introduces the concept of “the translatability of the original,” which is based predominantly on language. That is to say that the source text’s language determines its translatability. The fertility of a text, to rephrase Benjamin’s words, can be connected to Cortázar’s emphasis on the importance of language, as language—diction, syntax, and tone—is what determines a degree of translatability. In the 1981 interview cited earlier, Cortázar touches upon this idea with his distinction between translating a sentence and translating the same sentence’s content. While the former is easily attainable, the latter is contingent upon the content’s translatability, that is to say the translatability of the language’s

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nuances in a given sentence. Benjamin’s conception of “the higher level of a work” can be read in juxtaposition with Cortázar’s “bad influence of foreign translations.” However, it is important to note that Benjamin refers to an original text, whereas Cortázar discusses translated works. Regardless, there is an established hierarchy in terms of translatability that impacts the effectiveness of the translated text. Certainly, the original text and the original language are inseparable with regards to translation, yet the question of originality is an interesting one: Does the originality of a text hold in a theory of world literature that assumes the prominence of translation? As the answer to this question could be an entire research project in itself, I only pose the question to highlight the implications of translation in the literary world.

Using translation as a platform to study and dissect language, Cortázar viewed his translations of Poe as just that, an opportunity to engage in depth with the author’s diction, beyond just translating the plot of his stories. In 1983, less than one year before his death, Cortázar discussed what he learned from translating Poe’s works. Jason Weiss asked, “When you translated Poe’s complete works many years later, did you discover new things for yourself from such a close reading?” and Cortázar explained,

Many, many things. To begin with, I explored his language, which is highly criticized by the English and the Americans because they find it too baroque, in short they’ve made all sorts of reproaches. Well, since I’m neither English nor American, I see it with another perspective. I know there are aspects which have aged a lot, that are exaggerated, but that hasn’t the least importance next to his genius. To write, in those times, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” that takes an extraordinary genius. To write “Ligeia”
or “Berenice,” or “The Black Cat,” any of them, shows a true genius for the fantastic and the supernatural.9 (emphasis mine)

This investigation into Poe’s language demonstrates, from the perspective of the translator, a deep concern for translating beyond objective meaning. Cortázar attempted to capture the “highly criticized” language of Poe so as to transfer Poe’s voice from English to Spanish. Although Poe’s diction did not age well in English, in Cortázar’s opinion, his aim as the translator was to maintain as much of the original sensation of reading as he could, and part of that included Poe’s “too baroque” diction. As Cortázar clearly views Poe as a literary genius, it begs the question: Can this genius be translated from one language to another? If so, to what extent is that genius maintained? Obviously, there is not one simple answer to this question, since genius is a subjective matter. Yet, what is clear is that Cortázar discovered, through this translation process, an appreciation for Poe that lent itself to “the fantastic and the supernatural.” Here, Cortázar illustrates the influence of Poe’s Gothic literature on the fantastic, specifically Cortázar’s own contribution to the genre of the fantastic, coming about a century later.

Another possible reading of Cortázar exploring Poe’s “language” connects back to his belief that Argentine authors lacked an “acute sense of style, a well-trained ear, and high formal standards.” In other words, these authors lacked a distinct voice. I read Poe’s “language” as his voice, in the sense that Cortázar not only wanted to understand the anachronistically labeled “too baroque” language, but also to closely engage with the peculiarities of Poe’s voice. The idea of a voice,

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or in this case, a translated voice, especially that of Poe, brings to the mind the eeriness of a disembodied voice that aligns well with the Poe’s attitudes. There is almost a supernatural way in which voices are transmitted through translation, as the voice is altered to fit, to some extent, the target language.

Perhaps, beyond translating Poe’s works from English into Spanish, Cortázar, through this exploration of language, was able to translate Poe’s Gothic and fantastic tendencies into his own works. With this idea, translation is not necessarily linguistic, but rather stylistic. Now, it can be argued that this is merely another facet of influence; however, it is equally possible to view the adoption of certain Gothic and supernatural tendencies as a translation, basically two-fold, as these tendencies transcend both language and literary movements.

Reading Poe Through Cortázar

With regards to influence, which is at the core of this whole project, I argue that it is beneficial to view influence as reciprocal, in the sense that reading Cortázar can impact a reading of Poe, knowing the connection that these authors share. Essentially, I see reading backwards, that is to say, reading Cortázar in order to further understand Poe, as a method of viewing influence from another perspective. Reading Poe through Cortázar highlights to a greater extent the relationship between Gothic and fantastic literature and the evolution of literary movements regardless of language, region, or historical time period.

To some degree, it appears that Cortázar also pushed against the idea of a chronologically linear literary influence, and focused on the author’s role in
creative invention, without a specific recognizable source of influence. In this regard, in the 1983 interview with Weiss, he commented:

They [literary critics] think a writer has always been influenced by this, this, and this. They retrace the whole chain of influences. Influences do exist, but these critics forget one thing: the pleasure of inventing, pure invention. I know my influences. Edgar Allan Poe is an influence that is very present in certain of my stories. But the rest, I’m the one who invents it.\textsuperscript{10}

Once again, Cortázar asserts that Poe was a major influence on his writings but qualifies this claim by introducing the importance of original creation. He returns to the artistic pleasure in being unique, in creating for oneself, while not attempting to emulate or mirror another author or artist. As he invokes the role of literary critics, for they tend to “retrace the whole chain of influences,” Cortázar is underlining where the significance of influence does and does not lie. For the literary critic, influence is a way through which a certain author can be read through a “master” alone, yet for the author, in this case Cortázar, the importance of influence is based on the artistic pleasure of standing apart from those who came before, insofar as he or she is creatively entering realms previously unexplored. Moreover, this answer is in response to a question regarding the creation of characters in his work, and in the final line here Cortázar clarifies his own role in the responsibility to himself, to inventively create based not on outside influences, but rather based on his own creative tendencies.

In “Notes on the Gothic in the River Plate Region,” Cortázar acknowledges the lasting impact Poe had not only on his own development as an author but also on countless other authors from the same region. Using this essay as a starting point

\textsuperscript{10} Weiss, 74.
to read Poe will highlight Cortázar’s reading of the Gothic author and by extension elucidate the intricacies of this relationship. For the literary critic Harold Bloom, “Influence is simply transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one’s self, and its exercise produces a sense, and, it may be, a reality of loss. Every disciple takes away something from his master.”11 Although Bloom’s theory is mainly focused on poetry, his definition still holds with fiction authors. Moreover, the master-disciple connection is one way that Cortázar views the link between authors of fantastic literature and those of Gothic literature.

Beginning with personal accounts of his upbringing in a Gothic manner, Cortázar develops a reading, as it were, that evolves into the broader implications that this literature had on the River Plate region. One key point is the employment of “the other,” which as I explored in the previous two chapters, is an important device that both Poe and Cortázar use. Additionally, with regards to translation specifically, Cortázar returns to his concept of the “approximation” when he uses the term “the uncanny.” He notes the difficulty in translating this word into Spanish or French, and chooses rather to use the German, Unheimlich and the English, uncanny. In fact, he describes the German word specifically using the term “approximately:” “Unheimlich (aproximadamente: lo inquietante, lo que sale de lo cotidiano aceptable por la razón) [Unheimlich (approximately: the disturbing, that which comes out of the everyday acceptable through reason)].12 Finally, I want to highlight the final word of the essay, “masters,” which implies a hierarchy of

influence, through which predecessors, in this case Poe, are the masters, and those who follow, Cortázar, can be viewed, in a sense, as disciples and followers.

My hope with this translation is that scholars interested in Poe studies as well as Cortázar studies use this as a foundation in reading the former through the latter. As I have argued through Cortázar’s interviews involving translation, Poe’s voice is a major focal point for the Argentine, and with this in mind, one should read Poe, concentrating on his language, his voice: What makes it unique? How close does Cortázar get to translating this voice? These types of questions should guide a reading of Poe based on Cortázar’s understanding of him, which should also emphasize the translation of stylistically Gothic tropes into Cortázar’s own works. Cortázar goes beyond translating lo gótico into his work, he essentially makes it his own, he reinvents it. Beyond influence, there is new creation and new invention, which, as Cortázar explains, is the “pleasure” of literature.
Appendix

English Translation of “Notas sobre lo gótico en Río de la Plata”

Notes on the Gothic in the River Plate Region

To the bewilderment of critics who cannot find a satisfactory explanation, literature of the River Plate Region has a series of writers whose work is based, to a greater or lesser extent, on the fantastic, understood in a very broad sense that goes from the supernatural to the mysterious, from the terrifying to the unusual, and where the presence of the specifically “Gothic” is often perceptible. Some of Leopoldo Lugones’ famous tales, the atrocious nightmares of Horacio Quiroga, the fantastical intellectualism of Jorge Luis Borges, the sometimes ironic artifices of Adolfo Bioy Casares, the strangeness in the everyday of Silvina Ocampo, and the one who writes this, and, last but not least, the surreal universe of Felisberto Hernández, are some well-known examples to the lovers of this literature, perhaps the only one, by the way, which could admittedly be qualified as a sensu stricto escapist and without pejorative intent.

Nor can I explain why we from the River Plate have produced so many authors and readers of fantastic literature. Our cultural polymorphism, derived from multiple immigration contributions, our geographical immensity, a factor of isolation, monotony, (145) and tedium, with the consequent way to the unusual, to an anywhere cut of the literary world, do not seem to me reasons enough to explain the genesis of Los caballos de Abdera [The Horses of Abdera], of El almohadón de plumas [The Feather Pillow], of Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, of La invención de Morel [Morel’s Invention], of La casa de azúcar [The House of Sugar], of Armas
secretas [Secret Weapons] or of La casa inundada [The Flooded House], that correspond respectively to the previously cited authors.¹

Unless a relentless upbringing crosses his path, every child in principle is Gothic. In the Argentina of my infancy, education was far from relentless, and young Julio never saw his imagination hindered, benefitted quite the contrary by a highly Gothic mother in her literary tastes and by teachers who pathetically confused imagination with knowledge.

My house, seen from a childhood perspective, was also Gothic, not for its architecture, but rather for the accumulation of terrors born of things and beliefs, of the poorly lit hallways and the after-dinner, adult conversations. Simple people, the readings and superstitions permeated an ill-defined reality, and from a young age I learned that the werewolf went out on full-moon nights, that the mandrake was a fruit of the gallows, that in the cemeteries horrifying things occurred, that the hair and nails of the dead (146) grow endlessly, and that in our house there was a basement that no one would ever go down to. Curiously, that family given to the worst counts of fright worshipped virile courage at the same time, and since I was a boy I was required to go on nightly expeditions to distract myself. My bedroom

¹ In the first, mutant horses take over a city, liberated in extremis by Hercules. In El almohadón de plumas, a woman dies of apparent anemia, but when her husband lifts the pillow, she warns that it weighs extraordinarily heavy… Borges’ story and Bioy Casares’ novel are universally known. In La casa de azúcar, someone named Cristina is seen slowly substituted for someone named Violeta. Las armas secretas responds to the same obsession, but in a resolutely tragic climate. La casa inundada makes us enter a house where everything floats in water, from the owner in his bed to the candlesticks placed in pudding containers. I would like to add that the historical backgrounds of the Gothic genre in the River Plate region are scarce and generally amorphous; the names of Juana Manuela Gorriti (1818-1892) that, according to Jean Andreu, are the closest to the Anglo-Saxon Gothic model, and of Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg (1852-1937), whose texts pass without any excess of genius through all the variants of the Gothic.
was a loft lit by a candle at the end of a staircase where fear was always waiting for me dressed as a vampire or as a ghost. No one ever knew of this fear or pretended not to know of it.

Perhaps because of this, out of pure exorcism and without clear awareness of the compensatory reasons that moved me, I began to write poems where the grim and necrophilia seemed very natural and laudable to my family (my mother still keeps today, unfortunately out of my reach, a poem based on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” which I wrote when I was twelve years old, and perhaps some of the same stories where that same Poe and the Victor Hugo of *Hans of Iceland* and *The Man Who Laughs* dispute themes and atmospheres). No one watched over my readings, which passed from Montaigne’s *Essays* to the diabolical walks of Dr. Fu-Man-Chu of Sax Rohmer, and from Pierre Loti, so dear to my mother, to the horror stories of Horacio Quiroga. Each time that I see the libraries where children are nurtured, I think that I was lucky; no one picked for me the books I should read, no one was concerned that the supernatural and the fantastic were imposed on me with the same validity as the principles of physics or the battles of national independence.

If all children are Gothic by nature, I quickly discovered that the majority of my classmates were already subject to the laws of social realism; somewhere I have recounted my bewilderment and disappointment from a friend who contemptuously gave me back Jules Verne’s *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz*, saying: “This is too fantastical.” Cowboys and gangsters quickly dethroned the ghosts and wolves. I remained lonely in my kingdom of frightful confines, the fateful Middle
Ages from Walter Scott invaded me at night, from Eugène Sue (The Mystery of Paris was one of my most fearsome reading experiences). I knew nothing of Gothic literature properly speaking, and it is still laughable that the great authors of the genre were only revealed to me ten or fifteen years ago, when I read, in English, Horace Walpole, Le Fenu, Mary Shelley, and “Monk” Lewis. Prepared by my childhood, by my natural acceptance of the fantastic, from the uncanny in books and in everyday life, that great bad literature found, anachronistically, a reader like those of its time, quick to play the game, to accept the unacceptable, to live in a permanent state of what Coleridge called suspension of disbelief. (147)

At that time I had begun to write short stories; a first series remained unedited, for although the themes were excellent, the literary treatment did not project them with the force that they had had in my imagination, and contrary to most young writers, I understood that the time to publish had not yet come. When I decided to publish some stories, I was already 35 years old and had read thousands of books. Because of this, despite my interest in Gothic literature, critical sense made me look for the mysterious and the fantastic in very different terrains, although without it I am sure I never would have found them. The imprint that writers like Edgar Allan Poe—which brilliantly prolongs the Gothic into the middle of the last century—is undeniable in the deepest plane of my stories; I believe that without Ligeia, without The Fall of the House of Usher, the availability to the fantastic that assaults me in the most unexpected moments and that leads me to write as the only way possible to cross certain limits, to bring myself into the terrain of the other would not have arisen. But from the first moment, being still very
young, something indicated to me that the formal path to that otherness was not in the literary tricks without which the Gothic does not reach its most celebrated “pathos.” It was not in that verbal scenery consisting in distancing the reader from the start, conditioning the reader again with a morbid climate to force him to humbly accept the mystery and the fright.

On the contrary, the best of the Gothic legacy is manifested in our time within a general disinfection of its scenography, of an ironic rejection of all of the “gimmicks” and the “props” that Walpole, Le Fanu, and other great Gothic narrators employed. It is unnecessary to say that this reaction far precedes our time; in the middle of English Romanticism, Thomas Love Peacock was already mocking the genre in his delightful _Nightmare Abbey_, a mockery that reached its apex towards the end of the century in the pages of Oscar Wilde’s “The Ghost of Canterville.” And yet…

The cinema, for example. I do not think that the viewer of cinema, who is also naturally a reader of novels, suffers from a dangerous splitting of the personality, despite which he accepts—I being the first, and with delight—that the screen presents the Gothic in its crudest form, with the atmospheres, the decorations, and the most topical tricks. It will be said that this viewer ironically enjoys the horrors of vampirism of the metamorphosis of Lycan; for my part, irony is only an extreme resource and in bad enough faith, it prevents dread from overpowering me, in order to remind me that I am in a cinema seat. And when I see films like _Caligari_, like _Frankenstein_, like _The Night of the Living Bodies_, there is neither irony (148) nor distancing that saves me from fright, from participating in
what happens on screen. The Gothic scenery, expelled from the best fantastic literature of our time, finds an extraordinary avatar in cinema; and the child who avidly continues to live in me and in so many others, returns to enjoy without the scruples of the cultured adult, descending once again the gloomy staircases that lead to the crypts where the horror of cobwebs and bats and sarcophagi awaits.

I am glad that this is so because Gothic cinema is like a wonderful time machine that returns us for a few hours to the way of being and living of those who created the Gothic novel and those who read it so passionately. Outside of the cinema and in front of the printed letter, such a return to partial innocence is not possible, or is only to a small degree. In this sense, I think of *Dracula*, the great novel by Bram Stoker, who at the end of the last century dared to write a book apparently unacceptable for his time. It is enough to begin reading to notice the essential difference that mediates between the optic of Stoker and that of a Walpole or a Maturin. Realizing the impossibility of perpetuating (from perpetrating) the original Gothic in a highly critical era, Stoker uses a resource that would be pathetic if it were not both intelligent and effective, and that it consists only in showing the characters in the book as perfect imbeciles unable to understand the truth that appears under their noses from the first episodes, but also takes for granted that the reader will immediately discover what happens, but in turn he will behave like a “gentleman” and will play the fool until the end so as to not ruin the party. Stoker knows that innocence no longer exists in literature, but through talent he instead achieves a complicity and a compliance with the rules of the game that all of the admirers of Count Dracula have agreed on without hesitation.
In a complete and unfortunately opposite position is the work of H.P. Lovecraft, whose prestige has always left me perplexed. Although the author of an admirable story, *The Color Out of Space*, the whole of his work suffers from an unacceptable anachronistic vision. Convinced of the validity of his literary effects, Lovecraft is the opposite of Bram Stoker insofar as he dispenses all collusion with the reader, and instead seeks his hypnosis with resources that would have been effective in Mrs. Radcliffe’s time, but which are currently ridiculous, at least in the River Plate region. Lovecraft’s technique is basic: before unleashing supernatural or fantastical events, he proceeds to slowly lift the curtain on a repeated and monotonous series of ominous landscapes, malodorous clouds in the infamous swamps, (149) cave mythologies and creatures with many legs from a diabolical world. Now, if Lovecraft’s work were cinematographic, I would receive it with considerable fright, but as it is a written work, the monotonous reiteration of its childish vocabulary and topical settings is enough to awaken my most invincible boredom.

There is no doubt that in this area the critical sense of cinema is much less demanding than in literary matters. I am thinking of the difference established by Freud in his famous studies on *Unheimlich* (approximately: the disturbing, that which comes out of the everyday acceptable through reason) and that Maurice Richardson brought up in his study on W.F. Harvey’s admirable fantastical tales. There, Freud noted that reality is automatically set aside in fairy tales to enter an animist system of beliefs that civilization has already overcome and that relegates to a purely recreational or childish plane. But the situation is different if the writer
intends to move in the world of common reality, for there the strange or unusual manifestations, accepted outright in the fairy tale, inevitably provoke the feeling of the *Unheimlich*, which the English call *uncanny*, which does not have a precise equivalent in Spanish or French. Even, according to Freud, the writer can intensify the effect of these manifestations insofar as he places them in a daily reality, given that he takes advantage of beliefs or superstitions that we gave up and that return, like authentic ghosts, in the full light of day. This explains, Richardson adds, the height of Gothic literature in the 18th Century and ghost stories in the 19th Century, as they could only reach their maximum effectiveness in supposedly rationalist times and when superstitions appeared completely overcome.

This digression leads to the question, when it comes to the Gothic, if upon entering the cinema we do not leave out the cultural apparatus that is harshly imposed by the writing from the first school bank, and we return to a mainly audiovisual state that would be analogous to that of children in front of fairy tales; then, back to writing, the critical sense awakens in all of its demand, and in my case leads me to reject Lovecraft’s great wink that a few hours earlier I had accepted in any good horror film.²

² Writing, then. However, how can we reconcile this with the reservations of Anglo-Saxon critics about Edgar Allan Poe, that are based on a writing they find to be affected, pompous, and often “corny,” that is to say tacky? French and Argentine readers know Poe in translation, and in the first case the translator was none other than Baudelaire; paradoxically this may have influenced the terrible and the extraordinary of his best stories to come to us without the critical and, above all, aesthetic intelligence, influencing the ballast in a flawed way, which in the worst case could be blamed on translation. And yet, compared to Lovecraft’s obviously basic rhetoric and his too frequent European imitators, Poe’s flaws become insignificant and belong more to their time than to Poe himself. If upon rereading certain stories the ostentatiousness seems apparent to me, its effect is minimal in the face of the prodigious narrative force that makes *Berenice, The Black Cat*, and so many other stories a definitive sum of the Gothic spirit in the era that was already entering new literary dimensions.
To conclude where these notes began: I think writers and readers of the River Plate region have searched for the Gothic at its most demanding level of imagination and writing. Together with Edgar Allan Poe, authors such as Beckford, Stevenson, Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, Prosper Mérimée of *The Venus of Ille* and of *Lokis*, “Saki,” Lord Dunsany, Gustav Meyrinck, Ambrose Bierce, Dino Buzzatti, and so many others, constitute some of the numerous assimilations on which our own fantastic found a ground that has nothing to do with a much more primary literature that continues to subjugate authors and readers from other regions. Our encounter with mystery took place in another direction, and I think that we receive the Gothic influence without the naivety of imitating it externally; ultimately, that is our best tribute to so many old and dear masters.

**Translator’s Note**

i Cortázar is referring to himself here.

ii Here, Cortázar uses the verb “templarse,” which literally translates either to warm up or cool down. The sense is that he had to distract or occupy himself to combat fear.

iii Meaning Gothic literature.

iv Refers back to “the mysterious and the fantastic.”
Coda

Other than the translations of citations throughout this project, the translation of this essay was my first attempt at a large-scale translation. I found this to be almost a small research project in and of itself, as I had to constantly investigate Cortázar’s references and citations so as to ensure I was correctly translating just what the Argentine had intended in the original. This involved reading about authors and texts that I had not previously encountered, which often led to explorations of Cortázar’s relationships to these authors.

In completing this translation, I now have a greater appreciation for just what Cortázar meant when he said he “explored” Poe’s language. As this essay was published in 1975, Cortázar’s language is to some degree time-period specific, meaning his vocabulary is eloquent and very rarely colloquial. I found this to be a small challenge, but as I read and reread the original Spanish time and again, I gained a sense of Cortázar’s voice. Interestingly, in my opinion, his voice in this essay is quite different than that of his fiction. Perhaps that is simply a result of the difference between an essay and a short story. But it is worthwhile to point out that what I find is that this essay portrays the author’s voice as his own. With his fiction, the voice comes through a narrator, who is the result of invention, of creation. Nevertheless, devoting an extended amount of time to reading and translating a single essay certainly allowed me to find Cortázar’s voice.

My intention with this translation was to be as literal as possible in an attempt to be faithful to Cortázar’s voice. Yet, when the literal was untranslatable, because, in my mind, it would compromise intelligibility in the translation, I found
myself in an exploration, where I had to choose how to structure a particular sentence or choose which connotation of a word would better fit Cortázar’s voice. I began with a word bank of sorts, in which I placed repeatedly used words to ensure that when I translated them, that word remained consistent throughout. For example, the term “espanto,” which can translate to terror, horror, or fright is used throughout the essay. I chose “fright” as the best option, for I feel this term works well in maintaining Cortázar’s voice, the eloquent diction. With his elevated language, I though horror or terror to be too colloquial at present, whereas I believe fright more accurately represents Cortázar’s word choice and by extension, his voice. These small choices are rather significant insofar as the translator is certainly capable of altering, even if incidentally, the sense of a text.

Last but not least, after this translation, I have gained a stronger sense of Poe’s Gothic tendencies, including his use of “the other,” his structure that often sets the reader up for a particular ending, and his vocabulary, which accentuates the themes, styles, and images within the stories. Moreover, I have begun to further think of these Gothic tropes with respect to lo fantástico. For example, I think of Horacio Quiroga’s story El almohadón de plumas [The Feather Pillow], which Cortázar cites in the essay. How does another author from Río de la Plata make Gothic tropes his own? How does another rioplatense author’s employment of these tropes differ from that of Cortázar? This essay, in my opinion, solidifies the connection between these two authors, but also the relationship between fantastic and Gothic literature.
Conclusion

Julio Cortázar’s admiration, appreciation, and respect for Edgar Allan Poe permeates throughout his short stories and essays. Most notably, this fascination resulted in the large-scale translation project of Poe’s works, which continue to be some of the most widely circulated Spanish versions of Poe’s stories. As I have argued and demonstrated, these two authors are certainly connected through an influential relationship, where Poe informs a reading of Cortázar. However, my intent has been to extrapolate this question of influence, to push it to its limits, only to reverse our conception of a chronological reading of literary development. With this understanding of influence, essentially reading backwards, Cortázar’s work does not end up as an imitation or an homage to Poe. Instead, this relationship can be viewed as cyclical in nature, as each author impacts the reading of the other.

If we accept that Poe can and should be read through Cortázar, what other readings can we produce from Poe’s work? Do tropes that are traditionally found in lo fantástico become more evident in the Gothic stage set? Does Poe’s “unity of effect” gain a new significance when read through the lens of translation studies? These are just a few questions that arise when one considers a reading of Poe in which Cortázar serves as the entry point. Just as Cortázar translated Poe’s work literally from English to Spanish, I would argue that he also translated, that is altered or shifted, the way we should view this literary relationship.

In my comparison of “Axolotl” and “The Premature Burial,” I highlight another similarity on the textual level, where Poe’s mark on Cortázar is apparent. Cortázar’s adoption and modification on the physical and mental effects of
confinement adapt Gothic tendencies in a unique way, which manifests itself in the resulting fantastical story of transformation, of human-animal translation. My aim in adding to the scholarship comparing “Casa tomada” with “The Fall of the House of Usher” is to read the two stories as a summation of the connection between Gothic literature and fantastic literature of the River Plate Region. With this relation, I underscore that influence is not only present on a personal level, that is Poe and Cortázar, but also in terms of genre, where lo fantástico can be read as a genre that runs parallel to that of the Gothic. In this way, many authors of this region, Cortázar especially, make lo gótico their own. Finally, through an investigation into Cortázar’s relationship to translation, beyond his specific connection to translating Poe’s works, I emphasize the inherent link between translation and influence, where Cortázar develops a concept of translation that evolves and grows throughout his literary career. Specifically, influence, according to Cortázar, should not be the main concern for literary critics, but rather a study of the pleasure of invention should be the focus. With that said, however, he still explicitly cites Poe as one of his “many and old dear masters,” to quote the ending of “Notes on the Gothic.” This endearing tone highlights the pure admiration Cortázar has for Poe’s craft, for Poe’s place in world literatures.

Undoubtedly, Poe has had a relationship to the literature of the Spanish-speaking world that rose out of the literary “boom” in Latin America. However, what is less studied is Poe’s connection to Hispanic literature during his lifetime. In his story, “Never Bet the Devil Your Head,” Poe begins in Spanish: “‘Con tal que las costumbres de un autor,’ says Don Thomas De Las Torres, in the preface
to his ‘Amatory Poems’ ‘sean puras y castas, importo [sic.] poco que no sean igualmente severas sus obras’” [Provided that the habits of an author, says Don Thomas De Las Torres, in the preface to his ‘Amatory Poems’ are pure and chaste, it matters little that his work may not be equally as strict].¹ This seemingly out-of-place quote is interesting if only for the simple fact that Poe quotes Spanish, instead of French, which is more common throughout Poe’s writings. G.R. Thompson, the editor of The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, believes this to be a citation of Tomás Hermenegildo de Las Torres. This small, yet important citation in Spanish raises a whole host of questions relating to Poe and the Spanish-speaking world during his literary career: What other Spanish-speaking authors was Poe engaging with? Did he read Hispanic literature in translation? If so, what authors influence his Gothic short stories, if at all? Cortázar serves as one way to connect the antebellum author to Hispanic authors and literatures, but what is left to be explored in depth is Poe and the Spanish-speaking world of the nineteenth century.

With that said, the ultimate goal of this project has been to examine, or more aptly, reexamine, this literary relationship that crosses borders, historical time periods, and languages. My hope is that this research is valuable to both Cortázar studies as well as Poe studies, and to the scholars who have united these two authors in a plethora of ways. For Cortázar, Poe was an invaluable pioneer in literary creation, and as I see it, Cortázar is equally as important for delving into Poe’s literature.

Bibliography


