

# Translation as Alchemy: Julio Cortázar's Transition From Poetic Imitation to Invention in "Tombeau de Mallarmé"

La traducción como alquimia: la transición de Julio Cortázar desde la imitación poética hasta la invención en "Tombeau de Mallarmé"

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of translation in Cortázar's work focusing on his early years as a writer, specifically on his 1969 poem and essay "Tombeau de Mallarmé". It draws on Cortázar's biography, especially his Julio Denis period, on correspondence, and on some of his literary criticism and discussions regarding translation. It argues that, while the Julio Denis period in Cortázar's work was characterized by a more imitative and conservative approach to writing, moving forward and largely through translation, as can be seen in his re-creation of Mallarmé's poem in "Tombeau de Mallarmé" Cortázar redefines the poetic act. The alchemy-inspired conceptualization of translation and poetry he articulates in the essay "Tombeau de Mallarmé" illustrates how Cortázar's shifting poetic understanding of imitation and originality shapes his varying attitudes towards translation and, conversely, the way in which translation leads to the emergence of his literary voice and style.

Keywords: Julio Cortázar, Julio Denis, Tombeau de Mallarmé, translation

## Resumen

Este artículo examina el papel de la traducción en la obra de Cortázar centrándose en sus primeros años como escritor, concretamente en su poema y ensayo de 1969 "Tombeau de Mallarmé". El artículo se basa en la biografía de Cortázar, especialmente en su período de Julio Denis, en la correspondencia y en algunas de sus críticas y discusiones literarias sobre la traducción; sostiene que, si bien el período de Julio Denis en la obra de Cortázar se caracterizó por un enfoque más imitativo y conservador de la escritura, redefine el acto poético, avanzando en gran medida a través de la traducción, como puede verse en su recreación del poema de Mallarmé en "Tombeau de Mallarmé" Cortázar. La conceptualización de la traducción y la poesía inspirada en la alquimia que articula en el ensayo "Tombeau de Mallarmé" ilustra cómo la cambiante comprensión poética de Cortázar de la imitación y la originalidad da forma a sus diversas actitudes hacia la traducción y, a la inversa, la forma en que la traducción conduce al surgimiento de su voz y estilo literario.

Palabras clave: Julio Cortázar, Julio Denis, Tombeau de Mallarmé, traducción

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The relationship between Argentinean author Julio Cortázar and translation is well documented. Besides being a translator himself, Cortázar wrote about translation, and translation appears in his works in various forms. For Cortázar, translation goes beyond instrumentality; it occupies a wider and more complex space in his oeuvre. This can be seen from his early writings and continuing throughout his works. In this article I look at the role of translation in Cortázar's early years and in some of his transformations as a writer. I focus specifically on Cortázar's poem and essay "Tombeau de Mallarmé", and discuss ways in which the piece reveals that translation in fact played a key role in the emergence of Cortázar's unique voice as a writer of fiction. To guide my discussion, I draw on Cortázar's biography, especially on his early years, his Julio Denis period, some personal correspondence, and some of his works of literary criticism and discussions on translation. I go over the early-Cortázar process and transformation, from his Julio Denis time to attributing his writing to his own name. Beginning with early notions of poetry and writing as seen in Denis/Cortázar, I then develop my discussion on the notion of translation in his essay "Tombeau de Mallarmé". I aim to illustrate how Cortázar's shifting poetic understanding of imitation and originality shapes his varying attitudes towards translation and, conversely, how his translation work facilitates the emergence of his particular literary voice and style.

### **Cortázar as Julio Denis: conservatism and imitation in notions of reading and writing**

While living in Argentina and before emigrating to France as an adult, Cortázar used the pseudonym Julio Denis for an early period of his writing life, under which he published a volume of poetry titled *Presencia*. The Cortázar of the poems compiled in *Presencia* and of some of the letters written during this time is one that aligns with views of writing that are significantly less subversive than the views

and style for which the author later became known. These early writings by Cortázar reflect that he viewed his literary models as something to conform to, and thus replicate. His views, as seen in his early letters, reveal a more conservative Cortázar than the one who would stand out in a writing project such as *Rayuela*. The same can be said about his ideas of translation, which appear to be more conventional in his early writings than in his later works. Though his earlier notions of translation betray a tilt towards non-creative translation and a focus on the primacy of original texts, the gradual changes in Denis were seeds that would bloom into the ideas in Cortázar's later work.

In Cortázar's letters to his friends he articulated some of his thoughts about writing. For instance, in a letter to his friend Mercedes Arias--"Mecha"--when explaining his preference for letters over phone calls he says that he privileges writing over talking because, unlike oral communication, writing enjoys permanence: "... los diálogos huyen, pero esto permanence, en cierto modo, obra.... *legítima* obra de un espíritu que se tiende hacia otro que sabe de sus mismos afanes e inquietudes" (Cortázar, *Cartas 1937-1963* 99). He suggests the text's immutability in contrast to oral communication, "dialogues are fleeting." Other aspects of a more conservative Cortázar can be seen in these letters. In a letter written in the provinces of Chivilcoy and dated October 14th, 1939, Julio Denis includes his sonnet "A todo lo ido" which, according to Mignon Domínguez (Cortázar, *Cartas desconocidas*), portrays evidence of Góngora's influence in its rhyme and structure, thus revealing his earlier, imitative tendencies in poetry. According to Mignon Domínguez, Denis's choice of style suggests an early preference for classical themes and the baroque which, in turn, reveals the weight that his literary models of choice bore on him as a young writer.

Subsequent letters document Cortázar's initial acquaintance with non-European traditions in Latin America, as he expresses excitement over the interest of other writers in concepts of "transformation," as they emerge in the syncretic practices of santería cubana, in which an African saint is "la transformación de Santa Teresa (*Cartas desconocidas*)". In these tensions between his admiration for the European canon and his interest in Latin American cultures, between his love for high culture and new interest in oral tradition, and between his idealization of

Western mythology and his enthusiasm for non-Western myths, we begin to see the birth of Cortázar's most salient literary concerns in later works.

Denis's early conservative notions of reading and writing are further illustrated in his letters, such as when he responds ambiguously to his friend's welcoming anticipation of future poems. Denis expresses both gratitude and regret over Mecha's admission that she "didn't always understand his poems": "Siempre he pensado que yo no debería dar a leer mis cosas a nadie, porque en el fondo, para nadie están escritas" (Cortázar, *Cartas 1937-1963* 56). He explains that his poems are written because of someone and not *for* someone, and projects the view that a text is an extension of the writer's intentionality when he writes, that his poems emerge from moments and people that converge in "*el propio ser*," "one's self," and that a connection is lost when the reader does not understand. He does not attribute Mecha's misunderstandings to a lack of formal rigor on his part, but to a faulty "subjective" connection. Although Mecha was a close friend, seen by him as a sort of kindred spirit, he believed that understanding was contingent upon an essential intimacy between reader and writer. For Julio Denis, a reader's understanding of his text would be a sign of kinship and, therefore, any interpretation that failed to capture his intended meaning would discourage him, since he seemed to believe that with poetry "you either get it or you don't." This same logic informed Cortázar's early views of translation.

Denis's emphatic denial, at this point, to view a reader as an addressee seems to stem from his disappointment over the less than favorable reception of his poems. When somebody in whom he perceives "poetic sensibility," as was the case with Mecha, does not understand him, he faces the terrifying reality that his texts do not correspond transparently to his explicit intention. Consequently, when his poems are not "understood," he has failed to capture the essence of poetry, since in his view—from that period—poetry is not open to plural interpretations:

Usted me ha dicho muchas veces que no comprendía bien algunos poemas de mi libro; le servirá de consuelo el saber que, hasta ahora, nadie me ha dado la alegría de comprenderlos íntegramente? Ni siquiera algunos seres por quienes

los sonetos surgieron de mí mismo; esos —dolorosamente se lo confieso— fueron los primeros en no comprender, en decirme a manera de crítica, que nunca nada había más helado y más distante de la Poesía que ese pobre montón de versos. (Cortázar, *Cartas 1937-1963* 56)

The last phrase in this passage carries a twinge of resentment. It is clear that Denis expected a response but was disappointed with the one he got. Denis's ambiguous expression "ese pobre montón de versos" could refer to his poems' lack in poetic value, to their humility, and to their misfortune. The "distance" between Julio Denis's sonnets and Poesía –"Poetry"– evidences the distance that Denis felt with his most admired poets, such as John Keats. To Cortázar, Keats' work was the closest to "real" poetry because he captured "beauty." When he realizes that his poetry does not "capture" what he means, his illusion of control over his text is undermined.

Although tied to this somewhat conventional view of writing, Denis's letters illustrate his response to opposing forces over time; however, it is precisely in those contradictions that we can locate the author's eagerness to continually problematize and reshape his vision of the world and literature, of writing, of language and therefore of translation. His early views will gradually phase out giving room to the notion of textual impermanence that he applied to his use of the fantastic and to his understanding of the reader's participation in the construction of texts, a view that is more in tune with the tenets of contemporary theories of translation. Even in some early letters, Cortázar began to address key issues that would later become central to his work and also known as common ground for the Latin American literary Boom –e.g., a rejection for nationalism and provincialism as underlying conservative notions of language and writing.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "...En Chivilcoy, el nacionalismo alcanza expresiones absolutas y no hay que esperar nada de un pueblo donde la lectura de THE STANDARD es considerada como "acto subversivo y revelador de ideologías exóticas" (Cortázar, *Cartas 1937-1963* 56).

## Towards Julio Cortázar

The transformation of Denis into Cortázar is foreseeable in an author's letter dated April 15, 1942. After losing a literary contest, he explains “Yo estoy un poco decepcionado de mí mismo; día a día toma incremento en mi interior *un segundo individuo, peligrosamente inclinado al escepticismo, a la angustia... y al abandono de toda tentativa* [my emphasis]” (Cortázar, *Cartas 1937-1963* 74). His disappointment over the reception that individuals and institutions gave to his work makes it impossible to dismiss his struggles with poetry; thus, he announces to Mecha that he perceives “another self” beginning to develop within him.

While Cortázar explained in interviews that his passage from poetry to prose was a matter of self-criticism, his letters reveal that the individual reception of his poems and the institutional rejection of his work played an important role in this shift. In spite of attempts to prove the contrary, he was not satisfied with being a *writer*; he wanted to be an *author*, to be read and recognized. Up to this point, his work of poetry had not yielded the expected results. He continued to write and share poetry with his friends –from what can be seen in his letters. Denis wavered between giving up and keeping on while denying that his state of mind was related to that defeat. When he didn't win the contest, anticipating that his friend would attribute his defeated attitude to that, he wrote, “...usted, probablemente enterada de que el famoso premio recayó en otro concursante, se dirá sonriendo: “*Mr. Denis is a little upset, but he will recover soon,*” he emphatically corrects her misconception, “Si tal es su pensamiento, YOU ARE MISTAKEN” (Cortázar, *Cartas 1937-1963* 74). Denis's use of capital letters denotes a prideful attitude that does not accept (that) defeat –at least not in the context of Argentinean cultural institutions.

The respect of Denis/Cortázar for Mallarmé and his earlier devotion to Keats kept him within the confines of their legacy. For some time Denis worked on repeating Mallarmé's gestures with such success that his poems were received

as “pastiche” of Mallarmé’s “original” model.<sup>2</sup> Denis refutes this characterization of his work; in his view, they are not a “pastiche” but his homage to “el maestro” Mallarmé. Denis’s experimentation with Mallarmé’s style and his perceived failure to convey what he “had wanted to say” or “begged saying” both reflected and shaped his attitude towards the translation of poetry. In his struggle, Denis displays in his meditations a willingness to embrace change, and translation was part of this embrace.

Denis often expressed frustration with the translation of poetry. According to Cynthia Gabbay’s reading of *Presencia*, Denis’s conception of poetry is a vision “exclusive” to the poet for whom “the interlocutor is the Poet himself, God, music and the Presence: Poetry.” “It would seem”, she writes, “that the Presence emerged as an immanent quality of the objects (as the name indicates), and of the eyes of the Poet” and holds the implication that “the spirit of Poetry is a specific vision manifest in a particular way of observing the world-whole...” (98). If Denis’s own poetry already falls short of the model that he desired to emulate, translated poetry would fall even shorter. If he felt that he couldn’t find “the purest form of writing” to approach Poetry in his work and his poems, in their “original” language, could not be fully grasped by a reader, then a translator would further separate a verse from the “spirit of Poetry” simply because he would be unable to keep the same “sound, rhyme, rhythm and syllables” in another language that Mallarmé conceived of “as the only elements that could signify” (Gabbay 95-97).

Denis’s meditations on language set logic/poetry in opposition. His distinction reveals a contradictory notion of language wherein only the “high” language of Poetry is elusive, while that of logic contains fixed meaning. To Denis, in Logic it is possible to “descomponer cada concepto en sus composiciones primarias, averiguar su extension y su comprensión. Disecar, digamos, las palabras que significan conceptos. Los reactivos acusan todo el contenido (tan enorme!) de más

<sup>2</sup> Denis discusses the reception of *Presencia* with his friend Mecha “No me sorprende en lo más mínimo que los sonetos de ‘La Renuncia al Poema’ le pareciesen algo oscuros. Lo son, desgraciadamente, en sumo grado. Son un homenaje a Mallarmé, y aunque no creo haber caído en ‘pastiche’ alguno, fui a la estética del maestro, a su hermética concepción del acto poético, y de ahí nacieron esos versos que, tengo que resignarme a ello, *solo alcanzan a sugerir lo que quiso ser dicho* [my emphasis] (Cortázar, *Cartas 1935-1963* 128).

modesto concepto” (*Cartas desconocidas* 257) Denis’s contradicting notions of language suggest a hierarchical notion there of –Cortázar had not yet begun to challenge binary oppositions.

Denis's opposition between logic –grouped with science – and poetry implies that logic (like science) can claim objectivity and transparency and that in its language there is direct correspondence between signifier and signified. However, his predilection for poetry as the opposite of logic hints to his later rejection of dichotomous systems of categorization. Although he reaffirms dichotomies by setting poetry against logic, he demonstrates an early affinity for that which defies fixity and order, thus foreshadowing the concepts of his works of fiction. When Denis expresses his inclination for what is not conventional, what is opposed to reason (namely poetry and intuition), he rejects the tenets of logocentric thought and language structures:

Más he aquí que, en llegando al vocablo POESÍA, no hay posibilidad de fijarlo y, por ende, de definirlo....“Poesía es todo aquello que se queda fuera una vez que uno ha definido la Poesía” dijo un espíritu sagaz, y es bien cierto” [...] He continues, “Por que solo se define aquello que, en una u otra forma, es admitido en los cuadros lógicos del pensar, en las categorías. Y ya sabe usted que la Poesía salta alegremente por encima de la lógica... y solo admite ser intuitiva, aprehendida con todo el ser en una vivencia a-lógica. Mágica si usted quiere. (Otra frase sagaz: La metáfora es una forma mágica del principio de identidad”; es decir, que si ese principio –Base de la lógica- se expresa: A es A, la Poesía dice A es B... y qué bonito queda). (*Cartas desconocidas* 257)

While Denis does not defy binaries nor questions the assumption of logic as a “container of meaning” nor its objectivity, he finds in poetry a means to cope with the contradictions inherent to a transparent language that claims direct correspondence between the signified and the signifier. To Denis, the language of poetry is elusive and intuitive, it is at the margin of logic and rationality and words become magical. While the language of logic is in stasis “...en química, como en medicina, se usan reactivos para determinar la presencia de determinados cuerpos, para *fijar* ciertos elementos [the emphasis is Denis’s]” (*Cartas desconocidas* 256) the language of Poetry resists it. With movement the language of Poetry makes “identity

possible” and overcomes the paradoxes inherent to categories. With its magic, poetry overcomes the contradictions inherent to “logical” organizations of reality. Here Denis foreshadows the emergence of a Julio Cortázar that embraces the flexibility of all language, defies logical organizations of reality and is therefore, receptive to transgressions in translation and writing.

Julio Denis existed only while Cortázar lived in the provinces where he wrote poetry, and he signed his personal letters as Julio Denis. In 1943 (as can be seen in *Cartas desconocidas* 211-275) he begins to sign as Julio Cortázar. By the time the short story collection *Bestiario* was published, Julio Cortázar had been living in Buenos Aires for a few years and had destroyed some of his unpublished poems. During the transition from Julio Denis to Julio Cortázar, Cortázar translated fiction as Julio Florencio Cortázar (Gabbay 94), and completed the transition to Julio Cortázar when he signed and published *Los reyes* and *Bestiario*.

### **Cortázar's “Tombeau de Mallarmé”**

Julio Cortázar essay “Tombeau de Mallarmé”—which follows the eponymous poem—is one of the few texts in which the author talks specifically about translation in relation to creation and imitation in the context of poetics. In this essay, published in volume II of *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (first published in Mexico in 1967) Cortázar discusses his verse “Tombeau de Mallarmé” as a rite of passage in which he lost his “fear of pastiche” and finally composed a poem that he considered his own. In this brief essay Cortázar reveals a rather complex relationship with the translation of poetry. His discussion is not limited to inter-linguistic transference, it suggests that literary creation was either possible or limited for him according to his attitude towards the canon, an attitude that was tied to his ideas and practice of translation.

In reflecting on his path as a writer, Cortázar linked the emergence of his authentic literary voice to his endeavor of translation and the experience of its

“instability.” He suggests in interviews and in “Tombeau de Mallarmé” that he became an author—in the sense of a writer identified with his published “original” works—when he became confident that his work was not a “pastiche” of others’ and when his writing met his own high formal standards. In the essay, Cortázar discusses the translation of Mallarmé and suggests that an “extreme paraphrase” or “unfaithful” translation of the poet’s *tombeaux* turned into “original” writing: his poem “Tombeau de Mallarmé.” According to Cortázar this “paraphrased” verse is his as much as it is Mallarmé’s. It is as much an original verse as it is a victory of translation: it is both an original poem and a translation whose “originality” embodies the creative freedom that emerged, paradoxically, from the impossibility of fidelity. This transformation was an act of loving infidelity through which to “salvage” Mallarmé’s work, carrying his poetry from French to Spanish and the poet from Paris to Buenos Aires—conversely, this verse took Cortázar to Paris to partake in the Tuesday intellectual gatherings Mallarmé hosted with his group of poets in Rue de Rome. In characterizing translation as a means to bring Mallarmé’s “specter” to Buenos Aires, Cortázar does not merely echo the traditional view of translation as a vehicle of transfer but conceives of translation as a space for alchemical transmigration, a magical-methodical transformation that necessitates the death of the writer and the text as pre-conditions for their survival, both as translations and as literary renewals.

Beyond the obvious textual transformations brought about by its translation, the rewriting of Mallarmé’s poem in Spanish marked a significant transformation in Cortázar’s engagement with his own literary production. In order to transition from Denis to Cortázar, he had to overcome the fear of infidelity and the anxiety that translation induced in him—both of which were recurrent subjects in his personal letters during the years before he began to publish. In the essay Cortázar suggests that the safety and passivity commonly associated with translation are deceitful. As he articulates it, translation is a “terreno equívoco y apasionado donde se pasa de la versión a la invención, de la paráfrasis a la palingenesia” (Tombeau de Mallarmé 111-112). That is, translation is a space of uncertainty that troubles the opposition between original and imitation as discrete categories. According to Cortázar, in translation, only an “alchemist”, “sophisticated Judas” can overcome the tension between the lack of control that is inherent to language and the

constraining effects that an original text seems to impose. The restrictions of dwelling in translation may awaken passions that yield imitations, versions and paraphrases when "regulated", and innovation and renewed life when they are defied. Thus characterized, translation is a space where the resulting text—whether an imitation or a “new” text—is contingent upon the attitude with which it is approached. This tension between imitation and innovation appears to guide and direct Cortázar’s writing trajectory: Through the work of composing "Tombeau de Mallarmé," Cortázar left behind an imitative phase dominated by an anxious and excessively cautious approach to translation and encountered, for the first time, the unique voice and style that came to be known as Cortázarian from his first published collection of stories.

Cortázar's early references to translated poetry reflect fear of treason and transgression against an idealized original; in him this was aligned with his outspoken admiration for Keats. Thus, it is not surprising that Cortázar, then signing his personal letters and poems under the pseudonym Julio Denis, subscribes to views of translation and writing that reflect the Romantic ideal of individual genius--this was the case although Cortázar understood that Keats viewed the poet as resembling a chameleon, [in that he] “does not possess a self-identity”. In those early days, Denis/Cortázar referred to translated poems as versions of an original (his or others'). The notion that translated poetry constitutes a “version” of an original text written by somebody else simultaneously acknowledges translation as a creative transformation and affirms the primacy of the original text. In this characterization, translation is equated with inevitable loss of what he perceives as the non-transferable aspects of poetry: rhyme, metric and the poet’s particular worldview.<sup>3</sup> His attitude back then reflected his reverence for Poetry and the particular works that he thought best captured its essence. As his literary affinities changed, so did his attitude towards language and translation. While he continued to struggle with his own creative endeavors, his view of language and poetry

<sup>3</sup> Cortázar claims, for instance, that Keats “recovers” in his poetry the mythological atmosphere of Classical Greece. Keats “reconoce desde un principio los más escondidos atributos de dioses y semidioses griegos, los envuelve en una adjetivación que tiene la fuerza de la pindárica y la gracia exactísima del epíteto homérico...” (Cortázar, *Obra crítica* 42).

gradually began to reflect the influence of Mallarmé beyond the formal elements of musicality in language and the structure of the verse.

Cortázar's discussion of translation in "Tombeau de Mallarmé" is full of references to alchemy. In literature, alchemy has been used as a metaphor for creation, and also concerned with mastery over nature, achievement of perfection and transformation in relation to the continuation of life.<sup>4</sup> Cortázar's discussion of the predicaments that translators and/or aspiring poets face in terms of fidelity and treason shed light on the ways in which poetry and translation are similar in relation to language and representation, continuity and finitude. His understanding of translation and poetry as alchemical transformations suggests that their renewals are both magical and scientific, spiritual and material. As alchemists, the translator and the poet are both driven by a search for gold –a precious metal that symbolizes purity and incorruptibility. In alchemy, destruction is a precondition for transformation –e.g., the incineration of corruptible materials is a means to retrieve what's immortal, from the ashes of perishable forms. Cortázar's first characterization of translators of poetry as the incarnation of Judas is a lyrical description of infidelity in that both translation and poetry are acts of love. As the passage below suggests, translation brings neither comfort nor safety, since the translator inevitably faces the double bind of having to betray the original text in order to achieve its faithful rendering:

De los traidores refugiados consuetudinariamente en el oficio de la traducción, muchos de los que traducen poesía se me antojan avatares de ese Judas sofisticado que traiciona por inocencia y por amor, que abraza a su víctima entre olivos y antorchas, bajo signos de inmortalidad y de pasaje. (Cortázar, Tombeau 111)

In this poetic depiction, Cortázar invites us to reconsider our image of Judas, the quintessential traitor in the history of Christianity, by presenting him as a man

<sup>4</sup> Alchemy is defined in the Oxford dictionary in two ways, as "the medieval forerunner of chemistry, concerned with the transmutation of matter, in particular with attempts to convert base metals into gold or find a universal elixir" and as "a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination". According to the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, alchemy was seen as an occult science preoccupied with immortality, regeneration, and the transformation of base matter into precious metals.

who betrayed his “master” out of innocence and love. Here, Judas is redeemed as the most essential character for the *dénouement* of the Christian plot, given that his treason made possible the sacrifice that saved humanity and brought immortality to Jesus. Through this metaphor, Cortázar suggests that treason in translation is a necessary means to guarantee the continuity of poetry and that killing the text is a necessary condition for its immortality. A poem could not fulfill its destiny without first dying in order to escape the fleeting nature of life. In translation, a poem confronts its transience and reaffirms its immortality when the alchemist finds within its ashes the “essential salts” for it to come back to life. In alchemy, finitude is a necessary condition for continuation and transformation is renewed life.

We must be careful, however, not to associate Cortázar's language borrowed from the Christian tradition with the platonic notion of immutable essences. Through his metaphor of translators as avatars of Judas,<sup>5</sup> Cortázar implicitly proposes that a new text such as his "Tombeau" is reminiscent of Derrida's conceptualization of the double juncture of inherited tradition in which the heir betrays his tradition in order to preserve it, thus "saving life in life" and not as an afterlife in the realm of the Ideal. As Derrida elaborates on his *For What Tomorrow*, heritage is not chosen; rather, it chooses its heirs. However –and in spite of the passivity implied in this formulation, Derrida argues that it is still possible to position oneself as a subject of inheritance: though heritage is what came “before us”, what precedes us can be “re-launched otherwise”. Though heritage cannot be elected, Derrida states, heirs can choose to “keep it alive” by re-interpreting what was given “as a gift” and in “filiation” (4). Heritage is thus characterized by a double junction that derives from the tension that underlies it: the contradiction between “passivity of reception”, and the decision to say yes, to select, to filter, to interpret and therefore to transform...” This double juncture “demands two gestures at once, both to leave life in life and to make it live again”. The infidelity of an heir consists in selecting what to keep and what to destroy so that life might go on; in a gesture of treason that is an act of faithfulness: “Not to leave safe the very thing that one claims to respect before all else. And after all. Not to leave it safe: to save it perhaps, yet again, for a time, but without the illusion of a final salvation” (4). Leaving life in life and making

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it live again is actually the idea behind palingenesis. The unfaithfulness Derrida speaks of is necessary for that which “one claims to respect so much” not to be left safe, but be saved instead.

Cortázar's verse "Tombeau de Mallarmé" attests to his love and admiration for the work of Mallarmé; his recourse to “extensive paraphrase” marks a definitive shift in the writer's approach to translation and writing. The author considers this verse a cleansing ceremony in which he rids himself of his double traitor. Cortázar's "*doble traidor*" hints at both his identities as aspiring poet and translator. By translating Mallarmé's poems in his own verses he embraced the creative possibilities of translation and "buried" not only Mallarmé, but also his former self. His inner change also shaped the way in which he reread his own previous translations of poetry under the restricting precept of impossible fidelity. After he had decided in favor of transgression, Cortázar reevaluated his own translations and found them wanting.

Cortázar articulates his notion of creativity and of translation by referring to both poets and translators as alchemists. Alchemy was the search for immortality, a magical-scientific task of transformation, creation, or combination. Using alchemy as a metaphor Cortázar justifies the use of any means necessary to make gold shine at the bottom of the glass vessel:

Todos los recursos son buenos cuando en el fondo de la retorta alquímica brillará el oro del que habla Píndaro en la primera Olímpica; por eso se sabe de Judas alquimistas que no vacilan en esconder un grano de oro en el plomo, similar la transmutación para el príncipe codicioso, mientras siguen buscándola solitarios y acaso hallándola. (Tombeau 111)

Cortázar's ambiguous words may refer to translators but also to aspiring poets. The simulated transmutation applies to a translator and also to an imitative poet who takes existing nuggets. Conversely, both translators and poets can achieve a transmutation; for Cortázar Poetry and translation are capable of magical transformations (see Julio Denis's discussion of Poetry). Furthermore, his "Tombeau" essay does not describe only his experience of translating the poetry of Mallarmé but also different phases of his own writing. In hindsight, from numerous texts

that he wrote throughout his life, we can follow Cortázar's oscillations between "fidelity" in the translation of poetry and in poetry itself. His struggles as a poet with awakened feelings of rivalry that compelled him to purposefully transgress. In "Tombeau de Mallarmé" Cortázar posits both aspiring poets and translators (or aspiring poets who translate) as traitors, concluding that when he, as both, accepts the inevitability of "treason" and views it as an act of love, he is finally freed of his "*doble traidor*".

Given his personal relationship with poetry and his awareness of the unmasterability of language in both translation and original texts, his perception of gain and loss in the translation of poetry relate to a personal gain of awareness parallel to his loss of "innocence"--that of Julio Denis. Cortázar was confronted, through his own work, with his early views of authorship as control. As Bakhtin reminds us, it is impossible for any text to be "monological" for "any utterance —the finished, written utterance not excepted— makes response to something and is calculated to be responded in return" (Bakhtin 35). As Derrida, André Lefevere, and countless others have noted, conservative notions of translation are tied to conservative notions of permanence and authority. Denis's desire for absolute control over the text and its interpretation was thwarted by the instability of interpretation. He writes, "en todo caso la traducción de la poesía solo se imanta y cobra sentido como los triunfos pírricos". Thus, if a translation could obtain the intangible qualities of poetry, there would be no loss in translation. The triumph of "imantación" would bring harm to a poet-translator who does not wish to beat his absent adversary, nor to be vanquished. The impossible choices would be to not translate a poem—thus let it die without the possibility of transmigration--to translate it "faithfully" and lose its spirit, or translate it and transform it at an inevitable cost so that it may live on. In re-creating Mallarmé's poems Cortázar "translates" the "a-logical" disposition that he once thought to be proper of poetry. Cortázar no longer views the translation of poetry in instrumental terms: he embraces it and avails himself of a wide range of possibilities that span from imitation to invention and from paraphrase to palingenesis or re-birth.

**“Tombeau de Mallarmé”: Translation and writing as palingenesis, transmigration, and transtext**

When Cortázar posits translation as a place where it is possible to transit from imitation to invention and from paraphrase to palingenesis, he borrows from the alchemical process of reshaping, making, and transforming, tasks once reserved to “original” literary creation. By extending these magical powers to translation, Cortázar destabilizes the assumption that literary creation and translation are mutually exclusive.

"Palingenesis" is the most salient alchemical term in “Tombeau de Mallarmé”. The term derives from the Greek *palin*-again, and genesis, birth: re-birth or re-generation.<sup>6</sup> In alchemy palingenesis has several possible conceptions. Firstly, it denotes the possibility of a rebirth from the ashes of an incinerated body. In this context, palingenesis is carried out by an alchemist who after incinerating the original form recovers from the ashes its “essential salts”, placing them in a glass vessel and after careful heat making the “spirit” of the form appear (614). While that image alone suggests an ethereal spirit and afterlife, in alchemy palingenesis is also synonymous with transmigration, or a soul's rebirth in a different form.<sup>7</sup> Palingenesis as transmutation is reminiscent of re-incarnation and Karma wherein there is no immutable soul but a continuity of experiences and a regeneration of life in life, a “mental organism of sorts” (as characterized in Borges and Jurado 11-19) that is shaped by previous lives but continually transformed by the experiences of the new life.

There are several instances in which palingenesis is associated with literary creation; for instance, David C. Cody studies palingenesis in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, “not as a way to characterize reading but as a metaphor for the imaginative process itself, which permitted him to recall ‘the ghosts of his forefathers’ to

<sup>6</sup>The Oxford English Dictionary includes a definition that refers to “regeneration, rebirth; revival, resuscitation” or “an instance of this.”

<sup>7</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is a process by which a soul is reborn in an entirely different body or shape, suffering alteration in form or substance.

'life'. His mind itself became the vessel within which the ashes of the past... might be revived by the 'gentle heat' of his 'fancy'" (Cody 66). Because Cortázar refers to palingenesis in translation as the transformation of pre-existing texts, it may be argued that his use of the concept is more aligned with Borges' view of "transmigration". This idea of re-birth or re-generation suggests that the translator is as capable of "magic" as a poet and therefore that translation –similar here to Denis's early concept of Poetry– defies concrete reality and logic. The death of a text is thus as a precondition of translation, but it is understood as the release of the text to its afterlife.

Cortázar's conceptualization of translation as alchemy can be related to literary terms such as intertextuality, influence, imitation, and pastiche. In particular the relationship between a previous text and the "new original" that transforms it, a transtext, can be understood through Gerard Genette's conceptualization of intertextuality. Genette broadly defines intertextuality as the "co-presence of two or more texts" (1) and, in his study, he explores a variety of ways in which this relationship takes place. Some of the genres that fall under this category are parody, spoof and translation. In this sense, Genette does not refer to "derivation" in the essentialist sense, but simply as a way to describe the ways in which a text relates to another that precedes it either as "imitation" or as "transformation" (7). Cortázar re-creates a text when he transforms a previous text by trespassing the limits of form. As such, Cortázar obliterates the individual implied in traditional notions of authorship.

The idea of translation as palingenesis brings to mind regeneration, new life, a new body that exists in the world distinct and separate from its predecessor but that is, nonetheless, their continuity. In this sense, palingenesis recalls not only Derrida's definition of translation as a "regulated transformation" (*Positions* 20) but also on Cortázar's own later writings about writing, calling for the destruction of tradition for the sake of renovation. In its most transgressive versions, such as literary appropriation, translation can be understood as a space from which, in dispensing with "regulation", a text can emerge as a "new aggregation" (not in the linear, evolutionary sense of the West, but in the Buddhist sense) to literature. Unlike the Western concept of "original" whose essence is an indivisible whole, the idea of a transmigrated karma, for example, accepts the multiplicity of a text

that is all the texts contained therein and simultaneously its own, yet bound to the world and, precisely because of its “temporality”, not a “copy” but a text that is both a continuation and a rupture in its new form.

### **Biography and Writing in Cortázar's Self-Narrative**

In *Conversaciones con Cortázar* Ernesto González Bermejo interviews the author and explores the intersections between his literary career and his biography. Cortázar's conversations with González Bermejo are revealing not only because of what he explicitly addresses, but also because of what he omits in them. When González Bermejo asks "...dónde nace ese escritor. Su intención inicial fue la poesía, no es así?" Cortázar answers by revisiting his trajectory and characterizes his experimentation with poetry as a process of "evolution", a personal repetition of the history of literature that begins with poetry and culminates in prose. Cortázar traces the beginnings of his writing to his childhood poems but, strangely, omits explicit mention of *Presencia*, the poems that he published as Julio Denis in 1938 (16).

Cortázar's acknowledgement of his "first" two publications and his omission of *Presencia* suggest that he carefully cultivated his image as an author. Cortázar, the persona, had nothing to do with the Julio of his attempts at formal poetry. It could be said that Cortázar was truthful in that, as Cortázar, he never published anything other than short stories, a dramatic poem, and critical essays. Cortázar's silence regarding his years as Julio Denis relegated the poet and his "Mallarmenian" poems to oblivion and signifies with silence the symbolic death of the young poet whose existence ceased when Cortázar moved on to other forms of writing. His silence regarding his published poems also suggests an internal split between two authorial personae, as if those early ideas and literary endeavors associated with Julio Denis belonged to a person distinct from Julio Cortázar and thus, could not coexist in one mind.

Cortázar's suppression of Denis in his accounts deceitfully suggests a definite separation of the two personae and a complete disidentification with Denis, the poet. However, as Cynthia Gabbay suggests (2008), Cortázar incorporated Julio Denis as an "enigmatic side" and continued to "introduce numerous poems in his miscellaneous books, novels, and almanacs... as if the only function of poetry were to adorn his prose..." (94). The apparent disappearance of Julio Denis seems to be directly related to Cortázar's move away from poetry: while Cortázar readily acknowledged the dramatic poem *Los reyes* as his first published work, he described the circumstances of its publication as "clandestine and private" (González Bermejo 27). His words imply feelings of illegitimacy and discomfort, possibly, because *Los reyes* continues to visibly engage with formal poetry. In contrast, Cortázar refers to *Bestiario* with confidence as he states that he submitted it for publication when he considered that he had "touched the plafond" of the high ceiling that he had imposed on himself (González Bermejo 27). His willing and confident self-identification as the author of *Bestiario* positions the book as a materialization of his formal achievement and thus, his emergence as an author.

The transition from Denis to Cortázar was not abrupt, and in light of Cortázar's claim that his practice of literary translation allowed him to move from poetry to prose (González Bermejo), it can be inferred that translation played an important role in his "disappearance." The years that followed *Presencia* and while Cortázar intensively engaged in literary translation, coincided with Julio Denis's disappearance. While he had already translated professionally and for magazines and other publications –including the French magazine *Leoplán*– his first literary translation was *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe. In translating the works of Jean Giono, André Gide, Chesterton, Daniel Defoe, in the mid to late 1940s, Cortázar began to sign his full name, Julio Florencio Cortázar, just as he did with his short story "Bruja," published in 1944 (Gabbay 94). In 1947 he prepared for the examination for certification as a Public Translator in English and French, which he obtained in 1948 (Cortázar, *Obra crítica*). With the publication of the dramatic poem *Los reyes* in 1949, Cortázar dropped "Florencio" to become Julio Cortázar (Gabbay 94), the name that he would use until his death in 1983.

With *Bestiario* Cortázar moved from poetry to prose-fiction, but he preserved elements of Denis's literary influences and work. Cortázar continued to allow

Denis's "lyrical" voice to surface in subsequent works, (Gabbay 94). In this sense, and while leaving Julio Denis behind, Julio Cortázar continued to engage with poetry in different forms, and he also continued to experiment with the non-formal aspects of poetry through his use of language, imagery, and the defiance of "logic" that characterizes his use of the "neo-fantastic", which purposefully opens up the text to a wide range of interpretations. It is not surprising that Julio Denis's *passing*— a symbolic death and a transmigration into a different life— would take place during the time in which Julio Cortázar translated intensely, the years between 1946 and 1947 when Cortázar wrote and compiled the stories for *Bestiario*.

During the years when Cortázar wrote some of the stories compiled in *Bestiario* he also wrote and published his "Teoría del túnel". In this literary manifesto of sorts Cortázar states that destroying and recreating is proper to "[Argentinean] culture," calling for a violent approach to literary production that would allow writers to reflect upon reality. He writes "...cabe a nuestra cultura echar abajo, con el lenguaje 'literario,' el cristal esmerilado que nos veda la contemplación de la realidad" (Cortázar, *Teoría del túnel*). In this essay Cortázar identifies two groups of writers, those who "informa(n) la situación en el idioma (y ésta sería la línea tradicional)," and those who "informa(n) el idioma en la situación," and therefore, innovate. The time in which Julio Denis was reborn as Cortázar coincides with the author's intense involvement in literary and non-literary translation and his work as Cortázar reflects the writer's call for the destruction of the literary tradition and for innovation through a language that is transformative rather than mimetic in the "realist" sense.

In his different stages as a writer, Cortázar's experience parallels that of André Lefevere's archetypes of translators. Lefevere's identification of ideological and poetic affinities in different types of translators offers a view of the relationship between translation and creative writing. In the section "Translation: the categories" of *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, André Lefevere talks about "archetypal" translators to establish the ways in which ideology and poetics intersect with the practice of translation —he draws on John Hookham Frere's 1880 "archetypal" translators. In the case of Cortázar, by following the writer's transition from Julio Denis we can follow the span that Lefevere identifies. For instance, in his earlier, more conservative incarnation, Cortázar

embodies the "faithful translator", who according to Lefevere, tends to be "conservative in ideological and poetological terms," that is, translating by making choices "out of reverence for the cultural prestige the original has acquired." The "faithful" translator adds explanatory notes as a strategy to "resolve... discrepancies that may be thought to exist between the actual text of the original and the current authoritative interpretation of the text," in order to ensure that the reader "reads the translation the right way" (50) (my emphasis), that is, the way in which the translator perceives that the text was intended to be read.

In contrast, the later incarnation of Julio Cortázar embodies Frere's "Spirited Translator", who "adopt[s] the language and jargon of the day" and substitutes the "peculiarities of ancient times" with those of his or her own time and nation (Frere xvii, qtd. in Lefevere 38). For Lefevere, the "spirited translator" is not conservative and he or she is "less awed" than the "faithful" translator by the "prestige of the original." By taking risks "involved in anachronisms" the spirited translator's rewriting is "subversive," and prompts the reader to "question the prestige of the original and its received interpretation in both poetological and ideological terms" (50). Julio Cortázar embodied both archetypes to varying degrees during different stages of his writing career, with Julio Denis and his poetry fitting the more conservative archetype and Julio Cortázar fitting the archetype of the "spirited translator."

### **Conclusion: Translation as ritual cleansing**

According to "Tombeau de Mallarmé", Cortázar had parted with his double, a traitor who wrote poetry, in Buenos Aires. Cortázar situates this significant turn in the years when he translated intensely, when he also wrote *Bestiario*, and acknowledges that he overcame his stifling reverence for Mallarmé by translating his work through a creative, transgressive approach. Translation thus became, for Cortázar, a "cleansing ritual". The time when he performed this "ritual" was the

same time when he wrote several of the stories that, when published, signaled his public emergence as a fiction writer. In his various reflections and also in “Tombeau de Mallarmé” we can see that translation not only allowed Cortázar to overcome the stifling effects of what Harold Bloom called the “anxiety of influence”, which preyed on him when he wrote verses, but it also allowed him to experiment with language forcing him to face his fear of betraying the “perfection” of the original through translation. This happened in tandem with, and in close relation to Cortázar’s move away from translation strategies that privileged the original and into creative translations that embraced transgression. Once he demystified the literary tradition and abandoned his “loftier” pursuit of poetry (at least openly, according to Gabbay), he was able to challenge the static and centripetal tendencies inherent to the structure of language and its underlying “false” realism--as he describes it in his *Obra crítica*. By rejecting literary realism he resisted the misconception that the language of logic and reason is closer to “truth” than the language of metaphor, which undermines it. Cortázar’s immersion in translation constituted the crucial turning point that transformed him from a respectful student of literary models to an irreverent literary (re)creator.

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