

Julio Cortázar's *Axolotl*: Literary Archaeology of the Unreal

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Axolotl (*Final del juego*, "end of the game"), one of Julio Cortázar's masterpieces, chronicles one man's discovery of the axolotls, rather unusual-looking amphibians, his growing obsession with them and, ultimately, his supposed transformation into an axolotl. One of the better known and most frequently analyzed of all Cortázar's stories, *Axolotl* quickly establishes and perpetuates an aura of ambiguity surrounding the narrator and the axolotls which causes the reader to question the nature of reality.¹ Consequently, the text's openness has fueled interpretive speculation with regard to a wide variety of topics, ranging from religion and Aztec mythology to philosophy and psychology. Some readers view *Axolotl* as a commentary on the creative process itself, among them Alfred MacAdam, who writes that: "The philosophical problem of interpretation ... seems reduced in importance, displaced by the purely aesthetic problem of the representation of the unreal."² MacAdam's comment prompts the important question: How does Cortázar evoke a "representation of the unreal" that allows for such interpretive breadth? This study will consider how narrative strategies suggest that Cortázar's depiction of the "unreal" is inspired by a variety of literary sources, both classical and modern. Cortázar draws from these other texts to infuse his own story with subtle, yet highly significant nuances. A close reading will explore these fictional interrelationships and explain why Cortázar's vision of reality seems so multifaceted. The examination of how Cortázar manipulates these allusions will lead to an even deeper appreciation for this magnificent tale.

Cortázar apparently delights in teasing the reader by interspersing indefinite, seemingly insignificant references to certain topics throughout his text. Confounding matters even further, Cortázar constructs, then deconstructs, dualities or multiplicities around these same issues. For instance, close scrutiny reveals a constant play between light and dark imagery, and the narrator repeatedly revisits what he perceives as a wavering line distinguishing human

¹In recent years, numerous studies have appeared in English. Cf. Nancy Díaz Gray, *The Radical Self: Metamorphosis from Human to Animal Form in Modern Latin American Narrative* (Columbus, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1988) 72-82; Ana Hernández del Castillo, *Keats, Poe and the Shaping of Cortázar's Mythopoetics*, Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages, No. 8 (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1982); John Neyenesch, "On This Side of the Glass: An Analysis of Julio Cortázar's *Axolotl*," *The Contemporary Latin American Short Story*, ed. Rose S. Minc (New York: Senda Nueva, 1979) 54-60; M. Sánchez, "A View from Inside the Fishbowl," *Bridges to Fantasy*, ed. George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, and Robert Scholes (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 38-50.

² Alfred MacAdam, "La Torre de Danae," *Revista Iberoamericana* 39 (1973): 463. My translation.

qualities from animal characteristics and vice versa. By noticing the fleeting but repeated references to a particular topic, we recognize that this technique of scattered narrative counterbalancing is essential in creating and maintaining the story's aura of mystery. These constant oppositions, which are never fully resolved, leave the "reality" of each particular issue undefined which, in turn, contributes to the overall narrative flux. The identification of this pattern demonstrates how narrative strategy deliberately contributes to Cortázar's depiction of reality as elusive and mercurial.

Axolotl also resonates with echoes of well-known literary texts. As an author with a wide range of artistic interests, Cortázar carefully examined how his literary predecessors attempted to give voice to the "unreality" of their stories. The reader's sensitivity to this literary archaeology proves useful at each major moment in the development of *Axolotl*. At the outset, the narrator's attraction to the axolotls is reminiscent of the descent through the circles of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. Later, when the human narrator and one of the axolotls apparently trade minds or spirits, we notice an affiliation with the Greek myth of Circe. Cortázar's fondness for revisiting and refashioning classical tales is demonstrated elsewhere in his stories, as well as in his early drama *Los reyes* (The kings),³ based on the myth of the Minotaur. Finally, in the story's dénouement, the human narrator (supposedly) contemplates his new perspective from within the axolotl body, which he compares to being buried alive. This motif was somewhat of an obsession for one of Cortázar's acknowledged literary ancestors, Edgar Allan Poe. Many Cortázar enthusiasts are aware of his intimacy with and admiration for Poe's work and yet, to my knowledge, none has noticed this particular connection. The subtle associations between *Axolotl* and these texts helps to fashion the latter into the highly suggestive story that it is. Although certainly not overt, these literary connections provide another set of interpretive clues to Cortázar's enigmatic text.

Axolotl begins with a brief yet bewildering paragraph: "There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl."⁴ Any illusions of identifying with the story and/or its characters have instantly vanished; instead, the reader is left wondering about the narrator's "true" identity and about the nature of his predicament. With regard to the latter, a possible clue is planted in the first sentence of the second paragraph: "I got to them by chance one spring morning when Paris was spreading its peacock tail after a wintry Lent" (3). The reader's attention is called to this striking image,

³ To my knowledge, this play has not yet been translated into English.

⁴ Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl," *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 3. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text. All emphases are mine.

which vividly communicates the narrator's impression of Paris's springtime charm. The narrator's unusual metaphor utilizes an animal image, the peacock's tail, to describe Paris, an urban center representative of human civilization. This comparison introduces the narrator's penchant for exploring the human/animal boundary. Consequently, this simple description indirectly foreshadows the story's climax where the animal, the axolotl, will impose itself on the human being.

Given Cortázar's fondness for mythology, it seems appropriate to consider whether this peacock image is related to the myth of Argus. Edith Hamilton's version of this myth recounts how Zeus reluctantly gave a white heifer to his wife Hera, who suspected that the gift was really her rival, the beautiful Io, converted to animal form as a disguise. Hera, in turn, entrusted the cow to Argus, the famed hundred-eyed watchman. Distraught by Io's cruel fate, Zeus bade his son Hermes to kill Argus after lulling him to sleep, when all of his eyes were finally closed. Not content to be outdone, Hera then took Argus's eyes and set them into the peacock's tail, thus ensuring that they would always be open.⁵

Although the relationship between the myth of Argus and the peacock imagery in *Axolotl* may seem tenuous initially, several points of contact between the two merit consideration. First, the axolotls' eyes resemble those of the peacock's tail in that they, too, are always open. The narrator alludes to the axolotls' infinite sight when he muses: "Perhaps their eyes could see in the dead of night, and for them the day continued indefinitely. The eyes of the axolotls have no lids" (7). By placing this information at the conclusion to the eighth paragraph, the narrator emphasizes its significance. This unusual trait lends the axolotls a sense of otherworldliness. Thus, the peacock's fanning tail feathers introduce and underscore the roles played by both vision and visual imagery in *Axolotl*. As we will soon discover, vision is the *modus operandi* of this story, which principally consists of the narrator's ongoing description of the axolotls. Not only does he provide minute details of the axolotls' physical appearance, which he perceives by watching them, but he also becomes particularly obsessed with their eyes and what he senses behind their gaze. His observations thus pass from the physical to a more metaphysical plane. In fact, the climax hinges on the use of eyes as a passageway to the soul. Cortázar's narrator will undergo a metamorphosis via visual contact with the amphibians just as in the classical myth where parts of one being, Argus's eyes, actually become part of another, the peacock's tail. In Cortázar's first-person narrative, which is virtually devoid of any other sensorial imagery, the reader, too, is limited to the narrator's perspective. We can see only what his field of vision reveals to us. In conclusion, then, by exploring the possible link between *Axolotl* and the myth of Argus, we

⁵ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: New American Library, 1942) 75-77. Hamilton cites from Aeschylus and Ovid.

recognize the peacock image as a guidepost for future symbolic interpretations as well as a subtle foreshadowing device.

In general, the role of setting often figures prominently in Cortázar's stories and therefore requires careful consideration. Several stories, such as *Bestiario* (Bestiary) and *Carta a una señorita en París* (Letter to a young lady in Paris),⁶ depend on the function of movement within a particular setting. In *Bestiary*, the characters' ability to move through their house and around their property is dictated by the whereabouts of a mysterious tiger. The climax, wherein one character is killed, relies directly on restricted movements within the walls of the home. On the other hand, the frazzled narrator of *Letter to a Young Lady in Paris* is confined to a friend's apartment by the increasing number of rabbits he must care for, rabbits which he prefers to keep enclosed to limit their incessant motion. Again, it is movement within a definite area that precipitates the climax: the narrator's suicide. The story which perhaps most dramatically demonstrates the crucial link between space and motion is *Casa tomada* (House taken over), which is spatially the opposite of *Axolotl*.⁷ Whereas in *Axolotl* the narrator draws ever closer to the mysterious axolotls until he is trapped inside one's body, in *House Taken Over* the protagonists, a brother and sister, are forced to close off rooms in their home and move away from the strange sounds they hear within, until they are finally expelled from it. In each case, the stories' tragic endings are all closely tied to the characters' movements within specifically defined settings. With these examples in mind, we realize the need to examine spatial-movement clues in *Axolotl* as well.

As the narrator unknowingly approaches the axolotls, he bears some resemblance to mythical heroes such as Orpheus and Odysseus. The exploits of both characters in their respective myths include travelling to hell in search of rebirth. When the narrator sets out toward the Jardin des Plantes, his use of direction is significant: "I was heading down the boulevard Port-Royal" (3).⁸ Although used figuratively here, movement downward is often associated with the descent into the underworld or, in Freudian terms, into the unconscious. Although such interpretation of the expression "to head down" may seem questionable, we will nonetheless find that the narrator's ultimate destination is directly related to these two sites: hell and the unconscious. The narrator progresses from being outside on a spring day into the blackness that will eventually engulf him, represented by his initial entrance into the obscure aquarium building.

⁶ Both stories are from the Spanish-language collection entitled *Bestiario*. English translations can be found in the collection *Blow-Up and Other Stories*.

⁷ "Casa tomada" is from the collection *Bestiario*. The English translation can be found in *Blow-Up and Other Stories*.

⁸ In Spanish, the past tense form *bajé* is used, derived from the infinitive *bajar*, "to go down." Though phrasal verbs such as "to head down" or "to go up" are extremely common in English, the Spanish verb has a more direct spatial connotation and is, therefore, rather significant.

The story's second paragraph delineates the protagonist's gradual movement toward the axolotls, which leads him through a series of increasingly smaller spaces. As the story develops, he encounters barriers at the edge of each space which are let down to become bridges into new environments. After a bike ride through the city, the narrator soon enters the first enclosed realm—the zoo, which has two separate demarcations from the outside world. Visually, it is distinguished by a color barrier evident in the narrator's remark: "[I] saw green among all that grey" (3), which contrasts the greenness of the zoo with the grey cityscape surrounding it. This identifies the zoo as a unique space. Furthermore, as the protagonist enters the zoo, he leaves his bike against "the gratings," evidently referring to another enclosure: a fence around the park. Once inside, he soon enters yet another smaller confinement, the aquarium building: "[I] had never gone into the dark, humid building that was the aquarium" (3). These cavernous surroundings underscore the seeming timelessness of the axolotls and represent another world: dark, mysterious, and unexplored. The aquarium contains even smaller enclosed spaces: the various tanks housing the aquatic animals. Finally, the individual tanks separate the atmosphere and the people on the outside from the animals inside their watery environment.⁹

At this early point in the story, the protagonist's movement into ever smaller spaces—from the city outside to the zoo to the aquarium building—foreshadows the story's climax, when the barrier of the aquarium glass overlaps with the final barrier, the axolotls' eyes, which will become the man's passageway to his final, and most restrictive, destination: the body of an axolotl. Consequently, the narrator's movement can be envisioned as a series of concentric circles connoting his progress into increasingly smaller enclosures. By remembering that the narrator initially begins his journey with the phrase "I was heading down," we add this idea of downward motion to the pattern of concentric circles and thus discover a resemblance to the circles of hell delineated in Dante's *Inferno*. For Cortázar's narrator, the smallest space, which he has reached by moving downward, becomes his own personal hell. As he describes the axolotls' suffering, he finds in their faces "proof of that eternal sentence, of that liquid hell they were undergoing" (8); he has also "imagined them aware, slaves of their bodies, condemned infinitely to the silence of the abyss, to a hopeless meditation" (6–7).

Having followed the narrator's movement through this setting, we are now able to perceive a clearer association with Dante's *Inferno*. It forces us to realize the hellish nature of the narrator's descent into the axolotl body. In addition to this structural similarity, the *Inferno* and *Axolotl* are further related in terms of content. Cantos XXIV and XXV, which relate parts of the eighth circle of hell,

⁹ Daniel Reedy thoroughly discusses the importance of the glass barrier with regard to *Axolotl* and other works in "Through the Looking-Glass: Aspects of Cortázar's Epiphanies of Reality," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 54 (1976): 125–34.

graphically reveal the fate of thieves, who are thought to employ a reptilian secrecy while committing their crimes. In the hereafter, Dante invokes a note of poetic justice when he chooses reptiles to punish them. Interestingly, both Dante's reptiles and Cortázar's amphibians effectively "steal" human bodies through a strange metamorphosis. In fact, the main thrust of *Axolotl* chronicles the narrator's growing empathy for the axolotls, which eventually enables one of these animals to victimize him by "stealing" his body, thus leaving his human consciousness trapped inside the axolotl body. Furthermore, this is not an isolated incident, as the man-turned-axolotl soon realizes that all the other axolotls have met the same fate: "[I] saw an axolotl next to me who was looking at me, and understood that he knew also, no communication possible, but very clearly. Or I was also in him, or all of us were thinking humanlike, incapable of expression, limited to the golden splendor of our eyes" (9).

Whereas Cortázar focuses on the steps that lead to this theft and, to a lesser extent, the desperate situation afterward, Dante vividly depicts the process of transformation between human and animal forms, a metamorphosis the thieves must endure repeatedly. Since they took the property of others and made it theirs in life, in hell they must suffer having their bodies stolen from them by reptiles; consequently, they never know what is truly theirs. Dante imagines this process graphically. As the lizard and the thief trade bodies, "they fused like hot wax, and their colors ran / together until neither wretch nor monster / appeared what he had been when he began."¹⁰ Dante insists on this blending of identities throughout the process, later commenting that "now two new semblances appeared and faded, / one face where neither face began nor ended" (216; 68–69). In the end, neither being seems satisfied with its new form: "The soul that had become a beast went flitting / and hissing over the stones, and after it / the other walked along talking and spitting" (218; 133–35).

Several of Dante's notions resurface in *Axolotl*. First, Dante's account of the blurring faces, "one face where neither face began nor ended" (216; 69), is echoed in *Axolotl*; Cortázar's narrator is fascinated with the axolotls' faces, which suggest to him both human and animal qualities. He is mesmerized by their inexpressiveness, "the forced blankness on their stone faces" (8). Later, he characterizes them as masklike, which recalls Dante's observation that "Their former likenesses mottled and sank / to something that was both of them and neither" (216; 73–74). This phrase also clearly corresponds to the narrator's existential dilemma during the story's climax, when he is trying to comprehend what has happened. Grappling with his identity from within the axolotl perspective, the narrator explains: "Outside, my face came close to the glass again, I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the

¹⁰ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954) 215; lines 58–60. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text. The page number will be followed by the line number(s).

axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible" (8).

Both authors emphasize the animals' powerful stare. Dante notes that during the transformation, the two beings are transfixed "without once shifting the locked evil eyes" (217; 119). Is it by chance that the transmigration of souls in *Axolotl* occurs by way of exchanged, mutual sight? The narrator's account of the metamorphosis follows: "my eyes were attempting once more to penetrate the mystery of those eyes of gold without iris, without pupil. I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass. No transition and no surprise, I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass. Then my face drew back and I understood" (8). Although each author focuses on different aspects of the human-to-animal metamorphosis, common subject matter and similar details suggest that Cortázar was strongly influenced by Dante's *Inferno* as he created this particular "unreal" scenario in *Axolotl*.

This human-to-animal metamorphosis also serves as the focal point for Daniel Reedy's consideration of how Aztec mythology influences the structure of *Axolotl*. For Reedy, the story parallels the transformation myth of the Aztec god Xólotl, one of the twin brothers of the god Quetzalcoatl. In this myth, Xólotl is the larval form assumed by Quetzalcoatl in the Land of the Dead, from which he is later spiritually born. With regard to Cortázar's story, Reedy acknowledges the narrator's horror upon discovering his imprisonment in the axolotl, yet he nevertheless concludes that "the myth of Xólotl and the spiritual rebirth of his twin Quetzalcoatl suggest the promise of rebirth in a spiritual sense for the protagonist, as well, even though he is unaware of the fact."¹¹

Unquestionably, Cortázar incorporates numerous Aztec elements into *Axolotl*. This is evident from the outset by the narrator's insistence on using the Nahuatl word *axolotl*, although he admits that, during his investigations in the library, "I found their Spanish name, *ajolote*" (4). In fact, the axolotls' Aztec qualities are immediately apparent to the narrator, who states as a matter of fact: "That they were Mexican I knew already by looking at them and their little pink Aztec faces" (4). Later, the narrator emphasizes their heritage in his description of their "Aztec faces, without expression but of an implacable cruelty" (7). These observations seem to support Reedy's mythological reading.

Although Reedy's interpretation of the ending speculates about the protagonist's possible spiritual rebirth, other details conversely indicate a less optimistic vision. Of particular significance is the narrator's awareness of his ordeal. This consciousness points up a possible link between *Axolotl* and the classical myth of Circe, the beautiful witch who routinely turned men into

¹¹ Reedy 130.

animals. While Cortázar's enthusiasm for classical mythology is well known, his interest in this particular myth inspired his own story, entitled *Circe* (in the collection *Bestiario*), whose protagonist, Delia Mañara, has a keen understanding of animals and preys on her suitors, much like her Greek counterpart. One tragic characteristic is common to both tales: the men-turned-animals retain their human reasoning, which accentuates the horror of their predicament. Book X of *The Odyssey* tells how Odysseus and his men landed at Circe's island. When Odysseus's men encounter Circe, she works her magic on them: "Now when she had given them the cup and they had drunk it off, presently she smote them with a wand, and in the styes of the swine she penned them. So they had the head and voice, the bristles and the shape of swine, but their mind abode even as of old."¹² Edith Hamilton's version of this tale is even more dramatic: "They had come to Aea, the realm of Circe, a most beautiful and dangerous witch. Every man who approached her she turned into a beast. Only his reason remained as before: he knew what had happened to him. She enticed into her house the party Odysseus dispatched to spy out the land, and there she changed them into swine. She penned them in a sty and gave them acorns to eat. They ate them; they were swine. Yet inside they were men, aware of their vile state, but completely in her power."¹³

In recognizing their "vile state," Odysseus's men undergo an experience similar to the narrators' of *Axolotl*. As soon as the narrator realizes that he has entered the axolotl's body and is now viewing the world from an axolotl perspective, he comments: "Only one thing was strange: to go on thinking as usual, to know" (8). The narrator is disturbed by his transformation, but even more upset by his awareness of his newly acquired amphibian existence; he comments: "The horror began—I learned in the same moment—of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact" (8). Clearly, the narrator's consciousness intensifies his suffering. This rather unusual point of contact between the two texts seems to suggest that Cortázar found inspiration for his "unreal" dilemma in the fantasy of the classics.

As the narrator realizes his plight, he is overcome by a sense of horror. After his mental transferal to an axolotl's body, he laments: "To realize that was, for the first moment, like the horror of a man *buried alive* awaking to his fate" (8). His sensation of entrapment is so overwhelming, he soon reiterates: "The horror began—I learned in the same moment—of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, *buried alive* in an axolotl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures" (8–9). The repeated comparison of the narrator's state to having been buried alive creates a sense of horror similar to what we find in Edgar Allan Poe's work. As

¹² *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. S. H. Butcher and A. Lang (New York: Modern Library, 1956) 151.

¹³ Hamilton 211–12.

with some of the other literary influences we have discussed, Cortázar was well acquainted with Poe's theories of the short story as well as with his fiction. To cite just one example, Cortázar apparently pays homage to Poe's story *MS. Found in a Bottle* in his own story entitled *Manuscrito hallado en un bolsillo* (Manuscript found in a pocket).¹⁴ Cortázar was also the first to translate Poe into Spanish, although two earlier Spanish-American authors, largely responsible for shaping and popularizing the short story genre in Spanish, had also studied Poe: the Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga and Cortázar's own countryman, the celebrated Jorge Luis Borges. Certainly, Cortázar knew of Poe's penchant for the motif of live burial, which lurks in several of Poe's stories, most notably in *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Black Cat*, and *The Premature Burial*.

Of these three, the story most closely linked to *Axolotl* is *The Premature Burial*, due to its philosophical implications. After recounting several cases of people buried alive, Poe's narrator concludes that he, too, has been buried alive; he describes his fate as "the most terrific of ... [the ghastly] extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality."¹⁵ Poe's narrator further remarks that: "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?" (420). These excerpts touch on some of the characteristics which make *Axolotl* such a mysterious story: the axolotls are frequently described in terms that introduce and then confound two opposite characteristics—they embody both light and dark, they are both humanlike and yet, at other times, animals that resemble us very little. Not surprisingly, they also seem both dead and alive.

Although the narrator does not directly address the life/death polarity, he examines it indirectly by observing the axolotls' movement, or rather their stillness. The narrator's preoccupation with their immobility surfaces in the story's second sentence: "[I] stayed for hours watching them, observing their *immobility*, their *faint movements*" (3). Clearly, their slight motion demonstrates that they are alive, yet their stillness almost obliterates this. Their lack of movement situates them very near the dividing line. Only one additional use of the verb *mover*, "to move," appears until the narrator's transformation. This example is modified by a negative adverb which minimizes its effect: "once in a while a foot would barely move" (5). Significantly, it is only a part of the axolotl's body that moves, and not the whole axolotl, thereby further diminishing the impression of motion. In effect, only the expansion and contraction of the gills truly indicates that they are alive.

¹⁴ The Spanish-language story can be found in *Octaedro* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1987) 49–63. The English translation is available in *We Love Glenda So Much and A Change of Light*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) 249–63.

¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Premature Burial," *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Roslyn, New York: Black's Reader's Service Company, 1927) 420. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

Eventually, immobility emerges as one of the axolotls' salient characteristics, emphasized by six instances of the word *inmovil*, "immobile," throughout the story. This silent stillness captivates the narrator, who claims: "It was their quietness that made me lean toward them the first time I saw the axolotls" (5). As he attempts to comprehend them better, he comments: "Obscurely, I seemed to understand their secret will, to abolish space and time within an indifferent immobility" (5-6). This curious phrase could very well refer to the "immobility" of death, which is one means of abolishing space and time. Ironically, the greater the narrator's preoccupation with the axolotls, the more he begins to resemble them, spending hours motionless by their tank. Additionally, the axolotls' descriptions in terms of inanimate objects further contribute to their lifeless appearance. The body is compared to a Chinese figurine, its eyes are described as "two orifices, like brooches, wholly of transparent gold, lacking any life but looking," and its head is a "rosy stone" and a "lifeless stone" (5). In short, although the axolotls are indeed alive, they move so little that the narrator is repeatedly inclined to compare them to inanimate objects.

Despite observing the axolotls' motionless existence, the narrator nonetheless has difficulty accepting this stillness when he becomes an axolotl. Curiously, Poe's query about life and death, "Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?" (420), greatly resembles Dante's rendition of the thieves' metamorphosis into amphibians: "now two new semblances appeared and faded, / one face where neither face began nor ended" (216; 68-69). Poe's question, "But where, meantime, was the soul?" (420), seems relevant to *Axolotl* since evidently only the spirits of the man and the axolotl trade places.

In exploring the buried-alive motif, Cortázar may also have patterned his narrator on Poe's. Both are first-person male narrators who become so obsessed with one subject that their prophecies become, or almost become, self-fulfilling. Poe's narrator, haunted by people who were buried alive, imagines himself to be suffering from the same; Cortázar's narrator, who spends so many hours pondering the axolotl's watery existence, finally experiences it firsthand. Thus, Cortázar takes Poe's tale of terror one step further. Whereas Poe remains inside the boundaries of what is possible or "real" and thus maintains the identification between the reader and the narrator of his tale, Cortázar surpasses these limitations to press into the realm of true fantasy, to create a situation so peculiar that the reader cannot help but feel estranged from the text. Considering Cortázar's keen interest in Poe, it seems probable that Poe's tales of live burial, especially *The Premature Burial*, influenced Cortázar's unique, and even more extreme, depiction of the "unreal" found in the final paragraphs of *Axolotl*.

The fact that many forces work in concert to create a sense of the "unreal" in *Axolotl* explains why this story can be read in a variety of ways: the author is adept at interweaving, almost imperceptibly, allusions to several literary texts, each adding its own enduring, archetypal qualities; and yet no allusion is

developed so as to become pronounced and dominate over the others. The end result is a text that melds many familiar flavors, yet retains its own tantalizing integrity. By identifying so many likely influences within just one story, we may further regard the unending issue of how to categorize Julio Cortázar as a writer. The usual array of questions—how greatly indebted is he to Borges? Is his writing fantastic? Or is he a Surrealist, as Evelyn Picón Garfield suggests?—are often fruitless attempts to pigeonhole a genius who drew inspiration from a broad artistic spectrum to create works that are unique and undeniably his own.¹⁶ Cortázar's stories defy any type of classification that would ultimately diminish our appreciation of his literary gift.

¹⁶ Evelyn Picón Garfield, *¿Es Julio Cortázar un surrealista?* (Madrid: Gredos, 1975). This whole study focuses on theories and examples of Surrealism in an attempt to decide whether or not Cortázar's work fits into this artistic style.