

KEATS, POE, AND  
THE SHAPING OF CORTÁZAR'S MYTHOPOESIS

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Volume 8

Ana Hernández del Castillo

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the Shaping of Cortázar's Mythopoesis*

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## Contents

Abbreviations . . . . .	<i>vi</i>
Acknowledgments . . . . .	<i>vii</i>
Foreword. . . . .	<i>ix</i>
Introduction. . . . .	1
Part 1: The Magna Mater	
1. Woman as Circe the Magician . . . . .	17
2. Woman as Death . . . . .	43
Part II: Rites and Mysteries	
3. The Individual Quest . . . . .	71
4. The Collective Quest. . . . .	93
Conclusions . . . . .	109
Notes . . . . .	115
Bibliography. . . . .	127

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used to refer to Cortázar's works:

- E* – *El examen*, unpublished MS, written at Buenos Aires, 1948-50, kept by Cortázar in Paris. Used by permission.
- IJK* – *Imagen de John Keats*, unpublished MS, written at Buenos Aires-Paris, 1948-52, kept by Cortázar in Paris. Used by permission.
- LR* – *Los reyes* (Buenos Aires: Angel Gulab, 1949).
- B* – *Bestiario* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1951).
- OP* – Edgar Allan Poe, *Obras en prosa*, trans. and prologue by Julio Cortázar. (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1954).
- F* – *Final del juego*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1964; first ed. México, 1956).
- AS* – *Las armas secretas* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1958).
- P* – *Los premios* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1960).
- R* – *Rayuela* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1963).
- VDOM* – *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (México: Siglo XXI, 1967).
- 62* – *62: Modelo para armar* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1968).
- UR* – *Ultimo round* (México: Siglo XXI, 1969).
- PM* – *Pameos y meopas* (Barcelona: Ocnos, 1971).
- PO* – *Prosa del observatorio* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1972).
- LM* – *Libro de Manuel* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1973).
- O* – *Octaedro* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1974).
- FCVM* – *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales* (México: PEPA, 1975).

Cortázar's quotes of Keats's letters refer to *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1948). I have used Hyder E. Rollins, *The Letters of John Keats: 1814-1821*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

All references to Poe's works, unless otherwise specified, pertain to *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, Virginia ed., 17 vols. (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1902).

All references to Keats's works pertain to *Poetical Works*, ed. Heathcote William Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

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## Foreword

The formative role which the works of John Keats and Edgar Allan Poe play in the works of Julio Cortázar, including the elaboration of Cortázar's poetics, is well attested to both by Cortázar's own readings and preferences and by the widespread influence of these two writers upon generations of European and Latin American writers who also influenced Cortázar. Both the direct and indirect influence of Keats and Poe upon Cortázar can be carefully traced.<sup>1</sup> Cortázar's own admissions, his early readings and writings, and the unmistakable affinity of his theories to those of his two predecessors offer substantial proof of this dual influence. A more important and general question is raised, however, by the fact that Keats and Poe seem to be the dominant influence in Cortázar's work: Which aspects of the works of the two Romantics have been kept and transformed by Cortázar's imagination? Is there a common bond in the works of Keats and Poe which is also the common denominator for the works of Keats, Poe, and Cortázar? And finally, why these particular images, themes, or ideas? Thus, we are concerned here with identifying not only the specific images and themes that Cortázar may have borrowed from Keats and Poe but also what in the nature of these images and themes made them adaptable to Cortázar's own imagination. Obviously, an individual writer, regardless of how heavily he is influenced by a predecessor, does not reproduce an exact copy of the latter's work. The individual writer, like an entire culture or age, takes from the past only what it can bring to life or use in the present, what is, to use a much maligned as well as misused term, *relevant* to its own needs and problems. The past, according to T. S. Eliot, exists to be reshaped by the present into its own image. Similarly, Cortázar reshapes certain themes and images he found in Keats and Poe which struck a sympathetic chord in his imagination in *his own* medium, a modern idiom for the modern writer.

The images that Cortázar reshapes into a modern idiom are those which are archetypal in character; that is, if we analyze the images and themes which Cortázar borrows from his predecessors we shall find that most of them are not the idiosyncratic ones, the ones that belong concretely to the experience of Poe and Keats as individuals, but the ones which represent variations of

well-established archetypes. Thus, at this point, we cease being concerned with just the direct influence of Keats and Poe upon Cortázar to become involved with the concept of archetypes; for, at the most profound and vital level of the imagination, at least in this case, the effect of influence, which is historical and factual, becomes the operation of atemporal archetypes and myths, the patterns of experience common to man as a whole. However, the concept of personal influence does not disappear, for what Cortázar inherits from Keats and Poe is not merely a schematic pattern which may be found in many texts both primitive and modern but a pattern which had been modulated in a specific way. The archetypal descent into a nether world, for example, may be found throughout the mythologies of the world; but for the Romantics, and especially Poe, this descent into a nether world was carried out through the heedless plunge into the world of the irrational and of extreme emotions. The underworld of the gods of death and destruction of primitive thought becomes the habitat of the irrational, the abnormal, the excesses of the sensual within man himself. The way to reach this world is through Rimbaud's famous "dérèglement de tous les sens," through drugs, through the experience of man's least controllable emotions—passion and fear. The structure of the quest remains the same—the descent into a nether world; the content of the chthonic, however, changes its nature. Cortázar translates this pattern, which has been given a different content not only by the Romantics but by the European culture of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries as a whole, into a modern idiom by intellectualizing the "dérèglement des sens" of Rimbaud. The "descent" of Horacio Oliveira, for example, is no longer impelled by the irrational forces which drove Arthur Gordon Pym to the limits of the world, but by a deliberate, intellectual experimentation with the irrational and the abnormal as a means to some other world, to some other knowledge. The contemporary hero does not plunge into the chthonic world with the same élan as Rimbaud in "Le Bateau ivre." Whereas the Romantic hero indulged himself in extreme sensations innocently, that is, without being self-conscious, because he was the first to do it, the contemporary hero cannot escape from the self-consciousness which is characteristic of modern thought. The contemporary hero, from Broch's Virgil to Sartre's Roquentin, is a man who is constantly rethinking the experiences which he has had, and Horacio Oliveira is no exception. When Horacio comes into contact with the nether world, in the chapter with the *clocharde*, for example, his intellect is absorbing and integrating that "raw" experience into an intellectual system and tradition. No Romantic hero would have stopped to consider Heraclitus' experiment in the midst of such an experience.

Thus, we may legitimately speak of influences through archetypes. The Romantics employed and modified a well-known quest pattern; this "romanticized" pattern is then taken up in various forms by contemporary writers, such as Cortázar. The process is analogous to that of the life of an organism. An

organism inherits certain immutable patterns which define its species; however, the individual organism itself presents a unique configuration, which conforms to the pattern of the species but is an individual variation thereof. Archetypes are the original pattern; literary tradition may be seen as modifications of this pattern; and finally the creativity of the individual writer brings the archetype to life in a unique form. It is important, therefore, to establish the links between Poe, Keats, and Cortázar in order to know the specific, modified archetype which Cortázar reshapes. An analysis of this complex relationship must be carried out simultaneously at the level of archetypes and the level of influence; to deny or suppress one aspect in favor of the other is to simplify the reality of the poetic process implied in the concept of "chameleonism." To write from a poet's world rather than about it, one must absorb the very substance of that world; and archetypal images form the substructure, the underpinnings of that substance. The interpenetration of both aspects, the archetypal and the personal influence, must then be constantly kept in mind when evaluating the unique manner in which Cortázar combines and incorporates various elements from Keats's and Poe's works into his own.



## Introduction

*. . . ninguno de los grandes contemporáneos de John—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley—agrupa en su poesía (siempre mayor en cantidad y tiempo que la de Keats) tantos temas brotados del subsuelo ancestral, de la tierra incógnita y común que continúa dándonos todos los años, en todos los lugares de la tierra, esas flores verbales idénticas e inmutables que son caperucita, barba azul, piel de asno, cupido y psiquis, ondina, circe, pulgarcito. . . Ya nadie ignora que esos relatos son supervivencias de una mecánica ritual, restos enormemente alterados de conductas primitivas, de tabúes y comportamientos; que no hay diferencia entre la mano que traza los bisontes en Altamira y la que en nuestra infancia temerosa confiaba las llaves del palacio a la tonta esposa que pronto abriría la estancia vedada. . .*

Julio Cortázar  
*Imagen de John Keats*

Throughout his theoretical essays, Cortázar has singled out the unique quality that, for him, distinguishes the true artist from the mere craftsman. This quality—somewhat similar to Keats’s “negative capability”<sup>1</sup>—resides in an essential passivity on the part of the artist and an attuning of his psyche with the “primitive forms,” or rather, “primordial forms,” that seek expression through him.<sup>2</sup>

This basic idea in “Para una poética” is reaffirmed in “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores,” where the author distinguishes between those stories that are merely the result of literary skills and the far superior ones that result from what he terms a “possession” by forms that arise from “an undefinable and ominous territory” (*UR*, pp. 37-38; my translation).

For Cortázar, the great short story “installs itself inside the reader”—just as it does inside the writer—and fascinates him, lifting him from a faded, monotonous reality, and hurling him into an intense, numinous realm (*UR*, p. 38). This concept of a creative rapture or “possession” plays a prominent role in Cortázar’s fiction, as well, from the very beginning. The preparation of Delia’s poisons (“Circe,” *B*), Alina Reyes’ verbal games (“Lejana,” *B*), the meticulously ritualistic care of the “manuspías” and the rabbits (“Cefalea” and “Carta a una señorita en París,” respectively, *B*), the children’s games in “Los venenos”

and "Final del juego" (*F*), down to Oliveira's rescue of the fallen sugar-plum (*R*), Andrés Fava's "initiatic voyage" to the chateau of Verrières (*LM*), and the journeys in "Manuscrito hallado en un bolsillo" (*O*), all offer ample evidence of an interest in the ritualistic that constitutes, in fact, one of Cortázar's constant and distinctive traits. The peculiarity of Cortázar's ritualistic structures—as evinced in the stories mentioned above—lies in their relationship to unusual or abnormal mental states.

In his analysis of the creative process in "Del cuento breve y sus alrededores" (*UR*), Cortázar discusses his own "raptures" ("Lo que sigue se basa parcialmente en experiencias personales cuya descripción mostrará, quizá . . . algunas de las constantes que gravitan en un cuento de este tipo," *UR*, p. 36). Then, he likens these experiences to Poe's:

El hombre que escribió ese cuento pasó por una experiencia todavía más extenuante, porque *de su capacidad de trasvasar la obsesión dependía el regreso a condiciones más tolerables*. . . . Esto permite sostener que cierta gama de cuentos *nace de un estado de trance*, anormal para los cánones de la normalidad al uso, y que el autor lo escribe mientras está en lo que los franceses llaman un "état second." . . . Que Poe haya logrado sus mejores relatos en ese estado (paradójicamente, reservaba la frialdad racional para la poesía, por lo menos en la intención) lo prueba más acá de toda evidencia testimonial el efecto traumático, contagioso y para algunos diabólico de "The Tell-Tale Heart" o "Berenice." . . . Si Poe hubiera tenido ocasión de hablar de eso, estas páginas no serían intentadas, pero él calló ese círculo de su infierno y se limitó a convertirlo en "The Black Cat" o "Ligeia." . . . (*UR*, pp. 38-40; my italics)

By offering an explanation that would elucidate both Poe's creative process and his own, Cortázar reasserts his earlier identification with Poe as writer in "Del sentimiento de no estar del todo," from *La vuelta al día*. His explanation, moreover, follows the directives of the Jungian theory of inspiration to which Cortázar had originally referred in *Imagen de John Keats*, as we shall see.

Jung's theory describes archetypes as the guiding forces in the process of *transformation* or spiritual development:

The impact of an archetype, whether it takes the form of immediate experience or is expressed through the spoken word, stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own. Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. *He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind*, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night. . . . *The creative process. . . . consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work*. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, *and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life*. [My italics]<sup>3</sup>

When Cortázar justifies the success of a number of his short stories by saying that they “escape oblivion because I have been able to receive and transmit without great losses those *palpitations of a deep psyche*, and the rest comes from a certain ability not to falsify the mystery, to keep it *as near as possible to its source, with its original tremor, its archetypal uttering*” (UR, p. 42; my italics and translation), he identifies his theory of the creative act with Jung’s.

Apparently, around 1950—as he was halfway through his book on Keats—Cortázar became acquainted with the theories of depth psychology, especially through Daniel Devoto’s well-updated library which, as we read in the manuscript itself, became one of his most important sources of information in matters of mythology and anthropology. Halfway through his study—specifically upon undertaking his analysis of *Lamia*—Cortázar embarks on a long digression about matriarchal archetypes and rites of passage, expressing his amazement at what he sees as the considerable recurrence of these in Keats’s works. Henceforth, he regularly resorts to concepts of depth psychology in order to explain Keats’s poems.

In this respect, Cortázar’s interest in the psychological aspects of myth and ritual reflects a tendency of Argentine letters during the thirties and forties; as Jorge B. Rivera indicates, the decade of the forties crystallized a number of contributions to the theory of myth introduced by the periodical *Sur* since 1931. During these years, the magazine popularized a number of recently published works which helped to define the theory of the *archetypal*. These works were, principally, Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, Levy Brühl’s studies about the primitive mentality, Jung’s theories about the archetypes and the collective unconscious, and D. H. Lawrence’s discussions on the panic irrationality of vital forces.<sup>4</sup> In spite of their heterogeneity, these works have one trait in common: they all deal with myth and ritual as symptomatic of mental processes and revelatory of the structure of the psyche.

The outlook expressed through these works influenced a whole generation of Argentine writers; as Graciela de Sola demonstrates in her study of Argentine letters during the forties and fifties,<sup>5</sup> a deep religiousness and a tendency towards mysticism emerge as the common denominator of the works produced in Argentina during these years. Such characteristics are particularly prominent in the works of three of Cortázar’s closest friends at this time: Eduardo Jonquières, Daniel Devoto, and Alberto Girri. Daniel Devoto’s work, especially, was deeply influenced by Jung’s theories; it was in Devoto’s library that Cortázar found the treatises that shaped the outlook on myth he displays in the second part of *Imagen de John Keats*. On the other hand, the works of Leopoldo Marechal<sup>6</sup> had been influenced by René Guénon’s studies on mythology and religious science in general.<sup>7</sup> Ernesto B. Rodríguez and Osvaldo Svanascini, similarly, reflect the interest in myth and ritual so characteristic of these years.<sup>8</sup>