

“The Offices of CERN”: A Reading for the Internet Age of Julio Cortázar’s Story  
‘The Faces of the Medal’ (‘Las caras de la medalla’)

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I

The Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) has hitherto been best known as a major modern short-story writer in the fantastic mode and distinguished continuator in that genre of his still rather more famous compatriot Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), as the canonic translator into Spanish of the works of Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>1</sup> and as the author of the experimental novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), published in 1963 (cf. Cortázar 1980c, 1966b) and noted for the two alternative arrangements of its chapter-sequence and its invitation to readerly participation.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, Cortázar’s work is – in parallel to that of Borges – gaining a whole new lease of life for its remarkable, daring and ambivalent anticipations of the new relational structures that characterise the emerging universe of cyberspace. It is in this context that the present article will examine one particular story by Cortázar, ‘Las caras de la medalla’ (‘The Faces of the Medal’), and attempt to draw some lessons from this pre-Internet text for certain issues of human interaction in today’s brave new cyberworld.

The World Wide Web has been described by its creator, Tim Berners-Lee, as “the universe of network-accessible information, an embodiment of human knowledge”.<sup>3</sup> This totalising and universalising dimension of cyberspace is considered by a growing school of criticism to have visible literary antecedents. In particular, in the writings of Borges and Cortázar critics have identified key features of what would later be configured as cyberspace, such as the labyrinth, the omnivorousness of memory, the delirious proliferation of signifiers, cosmopolitan communication, the abolition of distance, the proliferation of specialist and sectarian interest groups, and, perhaps above all, the creation of a parallel universe that enters into competition with the familiar world to the point of erecting itself into an alternative and substitute for it. Both authors can thus be seen as prefiguring multiple aspects of the world of *virtual communities* – horizontal and non-hierarchical – evoked by an apostle of cyberspace such as Manuel Castells,<sup>4</sup> or the *flat world* preached by a guru of globalisation like Thomas Friedman.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it is today becoming almost a critical commonplace to greet the fictions of Borges as precursor texts of cyberspace. In a 2008 *New York Times* article, Noam Cohen (2008) affirmed: “A growing number of contemporary commentators ... have concluded that Borges uniquely, bizarrely, prefigured the World Wide Web.” As evidence for the cyber-Borgesian consensus invoked by Cohen, one may point to numerous articles by US, European and Latin American scholars – many of them, significantly enough, themselves published on the Internet. For the Brazilian professor Leyla Perrone-Moisés (2007), the Argentinian fabulist’s work as a whole constitutes him as a “prophet of the Web”; for the Irish critic Davin O’Dwyer (2002), the parallel world of his story ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,’ where the study of an imaginary planet gradually replaces that of everyday reality, is an anti-utopian prediction of the cyberworld: “Substitute ‘cyberspace’ or ‘the

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Net' for 'Tlön', and you have a dystopian McLuhanesque vision of the perils of our networked society, warning against the increasingly blurred boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual.'" The Spanish-born journalist Ignacio Ramonet (1999), editor of the prestigious *Le Monde Diplomatique*, sees in Borges' story 'La Biblioteca de Babel' ('The Library of Babel'), with its gigantic library full of largely useless books, an image of the hyperproliferation of textual material, much of it worthless, in the anarchy of cyberspace;<sup>6</sup> in parallel, Umberto Eco (1999)<sup>7</sup> argues that the indiscriminately omnivorous memory of the protagonist of Borges' story 'Funes el Memorioso' ('Funes the Memorious') is a prefiguration of the disconcertingly amorphous collective memory embodied in the World Wide Web. This whole impressive Borgesian prolepsis may be summed up in the affirmation made by the American critic Douglas Wolk (1999), in an article published in 1999 in the emblematic on-line zine *Salon*, to the effect that the Borges tale as such, with its infinite involutions, is an embryo of the world of hypertext and links, while the Web itself is "Borges' greatest and most invisible labyrinth".

It is probably less widely known that a similar critical consensus is in process of crystallising around the notion of Julio Cortázar as an imaginative precursor of cyberspace. The Uruguayan writer Omar Prego stated as early as 1985 that in Cortázar literature becomes "*una especie de sustitución de la realidad*" ("a form of substitution of reality"),<sup>8</sup> and in 1999 Froilán Fernández, a Venezuelan journalist, bracketed the two fantasists together as precursors of hypertext: "*Borges y Cortázar sobresalen en la escena latinoamericana como innovadores de la literatura no lineal; lo que se adelanta a la implementación electrónica del hipertexto . . . Cortázar ofrece varias secuencias posibles de lectura en Rayuela*" ("Borges and Cortázar stand out on the Latin American scene as pioneers of non-linear literature, thus anticipating the electronic implementation of hypertext ... Cortázar offers various possible sequences of reading in *Rayuela*"). This position is reaffirmed by the Chilean academic Álvaro Cuadra, who, in 2005, described that same novel (or "post-novel") as a "texto paradigmático en cuanto prefigura las posibilidades hipertextuales" ("paradigmatic text prefiguring the possibilities of hypertext"), where discontinuity, fragmentation and interactive reading prevail, while also signalling its prophetic incarnation of the metaphors of *bitácora* (logbook; in today's Spanish, blog) and *telaraña* ([spider's] web).<sup>9</sup>

Beyond any doubt, various of Cortázar's stories offer visible parallels with, or even predictions of, aspects of cyberspace. In 'Manuscrito hallado en un bolsillo' ('Manuscript Found in a Pocket')<sup>10</sup>, a text constructed around the Paris metro, human relations are subordinated to the arbitrary patterns dreamed up by a protagonist who aspires to "win" the women he glimpses as potential partners on the underground trains. The theme of 'Casa tomada' ('House Taken Over')<sup>11</sup> is the gradual but inevitable invasion of the day-to-day world by another, overwhelming and all-powerful reality, to the point where the story's apartment no longer belongs to "us" but to "them." The terrifying story 'Queremos tanto a Glenda' ('We Love Glenda So Much')<sup>12</sup> introduces a secret society of admirers of Glenda Garson, a fictitious English actress not without similarities to the real Glenda Jackson – an association of imaginary people united by a shared fascination which will today inevitably suggest a Usenet group, though the dénouement is so disturbing as to throw a large question mark over the very notion of virtual communities.<sup>13</sup> Another disorienting short narrative, 'El otro cielo' ('The Other Heaven')<sup>14</sup> anticipates the Internet's abolition of the barriers of space, alternating between a Paris symbolised by the nineteenth-century Galerie Vivienne and a Buenos Aires embodied in the strangely similar Pasaje Güemes.<sup>15</sup>

In multiple and labyrinthine fashion, then, the universe of Cortázar's short stories, like that of Borges' before them, articulates and anticipates the creative contradictions of today's cyberuniverse, as evoked by the Spanish writer and media protagonist José Luís Cebrián. For Cebrián (2000: 84), writing in 1998, on the one hand cyberspace generates "*una especie de diálogo*

*universal y multiforme*” (“a species of polymorphous universal dialogue”), yet on the other, “*esta posibilidad de tener a millones de gentes hablando entre sí, en círculos cuya composición racial, nacional, social o cultural puede ofrecer infinitas variantes, ... permite imaginar que el sistema de ordenación jerárquica de valores ... puede ser sustituido, en gran parte, por el caos*” (“this possibility of having millions of people talking to each other, in circles whose racial, national, social or cultural composition may offer infinite variations .. makes it possible to imagine that the system of hierarchical organisation values . . . may be replaced, to a great extent, by *chaos*” (p. 91). It is within such an evolving dialectic (dialogue or chaos, communication or non-communication) that we may situate the story by Cortázar whose textual detail we shall now examine.

## II

In the light of all the above, today’s readership may find it a notable circumstance that there should exist a story by Cortázar, first published in 1977 (cf. Cortázar 1977), whose narrative commences with the words “*Las oficinas del CERN*” (“The offices of CERN”) and, indeed, evokes a location having so special a place in cybernetic history as the *laboratories of CERN*, the celebrated European Council for Nuclear Research (*Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire*) in Geneva where, later on and in the real world, Tim Berners-Lee was to develop the World Wide Web (in Spanish, the *Telaraña mundial* or global spider’s web). The story in question is ‘Las caras de la medalla’ (‘The Faces of the Medal’),<sup>16</sup> and today, its location in CERN is likely to leap off the page to astonish the bewildered reader of the network age. If we follow Borges in supposing that retroactive reading can transform a work of literature, it will become all but obligatory to re-read this story, no longer according to the parameters of the time when it was conceived, no longer seeing CERN as exclusively an institute for particle physics and nuclear research, but, rather, as the birthplace of the Web, and, therefore, as a highly charged space with connotations of planetary and relational transformation. Indeed, Cortázar’s text contains the word *telaraña / web* itself, when it speaks of how “*la obligación de coexistir tantas horas por semana fabrica telarañas de amistad o enemistad*” (“the obligation of coexistence for so many hours a week weaves spiderswebs of friendship or enmity” – Cortázar 1977: 169, 1998c: 267).

The story narrates the falling in and out of love of Javier and Mireille, two researchers who meet while working at CERN. The narrative oscillates disconcertingly between the third person and the first person plural. The plot raises such issues as human relations, culture both “high” and “low”, the world of work, and cosmopolitanism – a whole gamut of concerns, all of which are connected in one or another way to that future reality which would later take shape as the Internet. We, readers of the twenty-first century, know that Berners-Lee’s invention has transformed, precisely, interpersonal relations, cultural practices, the forms of work, and international communication, creating a flattened world of horizontal communities. It remains to be determined whether in this narrative by Cortázar the premonition veers towards the hopeful or the threatening – whether the world of relationships which it sketches adumbrates ours of today and, if so, what we can learn for our actual universe from the re-reading of an artefact of the recent past – a re-reading effectively imposed on us by that reverberating acronym, CERN.

We may begin with the cosmopolitan dimension, insofar as it marks Cortázar’s characters. As may be expected considering that the real-world CERN has been an international institution since its inception, Javier and Mireille are of different nationalities and backgrounds. Mireille is, as far as we know, a Francophone Swiss woman, single and quite likely inveterately so; she has a permanent job at the laboratories, and resides in what she likes to call her “*cabaña*” (“cabin”) on the outskirts of Geneva. Javier, whose name indicates he is either Latin American or Spanish (he does not speak of his origins) is at CERN on a temporary contract; he is based in London, where he lives with his (presumably British or Irish) wife Eileen. The story begins with the gradually developing intimacy

of Javier and Mireille, participants in a project whose nature is not specified. The work environment and the cultural ambiance that frame the two are both resolutely international, tinged with a cosmopolitanism which is a recurrent feature in Cortázar's work (as notably in the Parisian sequences of *Rayuela*) and which also recalls the deracinated protagonists of *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*) by another Latin American master, Cuba's Alejo Carpentier (see Carpentier 1953, 1968). Curiously, the international references extend to two countries from Eastern Europe, a region which might have been considered off the intellectual and cultural map – Romania and a country that no longer exists, now splintered into seven pieces, namely Yugoslavia (more accessible at the time than Romania, but still seen as *communist* and, therefore, *alien*). One of their colleagues at CERN is a “*mecanógrafo poeta y yugoslavo*” (“a male stenographer, poet and Yugoslavian”: Cortázar 1977: 168, 1998c: 267), and later Javier suggests to Mireille (in vain) that they holiday together on “*la costa dálmata*” (“The Dalmatian coast”), in what is now Croatia (p. 180/ 276); Javier and Eileen have had adventures together in Romania (p. 169/267), and in Geneva he and Mireille dine together in a “*restaurante rumano*” (“Romanian restaurant” – p. 178/274). The text thus includes a strange premonition of the rapprochement between Europe's then estranged East and West that would come to pass later, coinciding with the dawn of the Internet age.

Culture, an aspect which is of major importance above all for Mireille, both unites and separates the protagonists. In this story as in others by Cortázar (notably ‘Las ménades’ / ‘The Maenades’, a tale that disorientingly transposes the excesses of Beatlemania to the world of classical music) – and, as in *Rayuela* with its deranged classical pianist and its multiple jazz, blues and tango references, the cultural revolves more often than not around music, not without tensions since the musical arena inevitably opposes the classical and the popular, music considered demanding and music seen, rightly or wrongly, as more facile. At the beginning, we learn of “*la leve música del transistor japonés*” (“the soft music from the Japanese transistor”) which Javier listens to while he works (Cortázar 1977: 168, 1998c: 267). At a lunch at Mireille's house, a colleague brings “*un disco de los Beatles*” (“a Beatles record” – p. 171/269), which does not appear to please her. Javier (like Cortázar himself) appreciates jazz, but not Mireille (p. 172/270); later on in London, Javier tries to distract himself from Mireille with a certain Maria Elena who is a Rolling Stones fan (p. 177/274). Against these pleasures which she would see as trivial, is opposed “*la severa discoteca de Mireille*” (“Mireille's stern collection”: p. 171/269). Nonetheless, she persuades Javier to accept and share her passion for classical music, and thus the text burgeons with references to composers and performers in that genre: Mireille is a great admirer of Brahms (p. 170/168); she and Javier agree “*en Schubert pero no en Bartok*” (“on Schubert but not on Bartok” – p. 172/270); they both appreciate the “*el violoncelo de Rostropovich*” (“Rostropovich's cello”: p. 173/271) and together attend a concert by the violinist Isaac Stern (p. 177/274). Nonetheless, avant-garde classical music is perceived more as a disturbing element: “*Del resto no hablamos, quedaban por explorar . . . Pierre Boulez, John Cage (pero Mireille no Cage, eso era seguro aunque no hubieran hablado de él, y probablemente Boulez músico no, aunque director sí, esos matices importantes)*” (“We didn't talk about the rest, left to explore were . . . Pierre Boulez, John Cage (but Mireille Cage certainly not, even if they hadn't mentioned him, and probably Boulez the musician no, although the conductor yes, those important nuances” – p. 172/270). It seems that culture and art, rather than inducing harmony, can confound and disorient those who consume them.

Another factor which should in theory have brought the two ill-starred lovers together is the world of work itself, for, as the first sentence of the tale proclaims, it is in “*las oficinas del CERN*” (“the offices of CERN”) that they meet, and it is work that brings Javier to the Swiss city: “*Era la cuarta vez en tres años que iba a trabajar como temporero a Ginebra*” (“It was the fourth time in three years that he'd gone to work as a temporary in Geneva” – Cortázar 1977: 168, 1998c: 267), having presumably been seconded by his (unspecified) bosses in London. Nonetheless, his professional dedication proves not to be of the strongest: we do not learn what exactly he is

researching, and when “*el CERN ardía en una conferencia de alto nivel, Javier tuvo que trabajar de veras y Mireille pareció tenerle lástima cuando él se lo dijo lúgubrementemente*” (“CERN was aglow with a high-level conference, Javier really had to work and Mireille seemed to feel sorry for him when he mournfully told her” – p. 172/269). Later and despite his desire to be with Mireille, we find him “*rechazando los contratos que le proponían en Ginebra*” (“turning down the contracts they offered him in Geneva” – p. 177/273). Meanwhile, we are kept equally in the dark as to the exact nature of Mireille’s professional responsibilities, although she appears to be more serious and to have a fixed post. What is striking that the whole story should have begun in a working environment that is in itself known for its intensity and its devotion to knowledge, even before the time of Berners-Lee.

All in all, Javier and Mireille seem to be more suited to separation and fruitlessness than to a satisfying and creative union. Thus we may interpret the story’s title: the lovers are the *two sides of the medal*, condemned to live eternal separation however much they aspire to be together. The metaphor recurs across the text: “*como una medalla es al mismo tiempo su anverso y su reverso*” (“in the same way that a medal is obverse and reverse at the same time”: p. 170/268); “*Mireille de su lado de la medalla ya no esperaría nada*” (“Mireille from her side of the medal probably no longer expected anything” – p. 181/276); “*la medalla está ahí entre nosotros*” (“the medal was there between us” – p. 181/276). The intermingling of nationalities, the tentacles of culture, the links created by interdisciplinary teamwork: all has come to nothing.

Yet the great desire of these two unfortunate individuals, across the narrative, is exactly the opposite: to be united in love and to create a world where the medal has only one side. Convinced that they love each other, they several times attempt a physical coming-together, which eludes them and whose failure is already foreseen in a fast-forward flash a little after the beginning: “*Mireille llora a veces mientras escucha un determinado quinteto de Brahms, sola al atardecer en su salón de vigas oscuras y muebles rústicos (...). Javier no sabe llorar, sus lágrimas eligen condensarse en pesadillas (...) de las que se despoja bebiendo coñac y escribiendo textos*” (“Mireille weeps sometimes as she listens to a certain Brahms quintet, alone at dusk in her living room of dark beams and rustic furniture (...). Javier doesn’t know how to weep, his tears choose to condense into nightmares (...) which are gotten rid of by drinking cognac and writing texts” – Cortázar 1977: 170, 1998c: 268). The protagonists seek physical union on two occasions, the first at Mireille’s home, the second in Javier’s hotel room, but there is no prince-and-princess happy ending to this story. However intimate their relational bond, on the physical plane consummation eludes them. Finally, there is the no doubt inevitable decision not to see each other again, and the text concludes with the ironic repetition, almost word for word, of the sensations of non-plenitude that it had already predicted for both: “*En algún atardecer Mireille habrá llorado mientras escuchaba un determinado quinteto de Brahms, pero Javier no sabe llorar ...*” (“One day at dusk Mireille wept while she listened to a certain Brahms quintet, but Javier doesn’t know how to cry ...” – p. 181/277; the repetitions are closer in the Spanish text).

On finishing the story, today’s reader may feel tempted to place a highly negative interpretation on the link, anachronistic but inevitable, which this text of Cortázar’s constructs *for us* between the work of CERN and interpersonal relationships – between deep-level scientific research and the human non-communication which appears to accompany it. If we extrapolate the story of Javier and Mireille to the *networked reality* of someone turning Cortázar’s pages today, we may wish to conclude that neither knowledge, nor art, nor cultural *métissage* – all phenomena now in process of being transformed by the Internet – are capable of prevailing against the ineluctable and fundamental solitude of the human being.

Yet, nonetheless, the text of this story permits, in its conclusion, a different reading, less drastic and more hopeful. As the reader knew in advance, there is no physical consummation, and Javier has to overcome the trauma by other means: “*sólo tiene pesadillas de las que se despoja escribiendo textos que tratan de ser como las pesadillas, allí donde nadie tiene su verdadero nombre pero acaso su verdad, allí donde no hay medallas de canto con anverso y reverso ni peldaños consagrados que hay que subir, pero, claro, son solamente textos*” (“he only has nightmares from which he frees himself by writing texts that try to be like nightmares, there where no one has his true name but perhaps his truth, there where there is no medal standing on edge with obverse and reverse, where there are no consecrated steps to climb; but, of course, they’re only texts”: p. 181/277). Thus, Cortázar’s *text* terminates, in self-referential, indeed metatextual fashion, with that same word (in the plural), “*textos / texts*”. At the same time, there is a therapeutic dimension in the act of writing to which Javier gives himself over: his texts are *like* nightmares, but it is not said that they *are* nightmares – they have a cathartic element which ends up distancing them from the nightmares they imitate. It might perhaps have been more useful and fecund for Javier and Mireille had they tried from the beginning to structure their relationship less around traditional physical consummation than on a less palpably material and, indeed, more *textual* foundation. This is a crucial characteristic of the networked universe, from which the twenty-first-century reader emerges to read this story written three decades ago, and to which that reader will then return. The human relations that weave themselves across newsgroups, mailing lists, instant messaging conversations or social and professional networking sites no longer absolutely need physical contact. Those who meet through the networks, whatever their age, nationality or gender, may never even once meet face-to-face in what is conventionally called the material world. Someone living in Lima can perfectly well forge the most fruitful personal and professional relationship with someone else in Delhi, without feeling the slightest need to board a plane to India. The physical non-gratification under whose sign Cortázar’s tale evolves traces out, paradoxically, a path for other forms of gratification, less tangible in nature but, it may be, in the end more durable and satisfying. The romance situated by the perceptive Argentinian in the CERN of 1977 can now be read as a prefiguration of those *other* stories which are emanating and will emanate, in the twenty-first century, from the new world conceived in that other CERN, no longer that of Julio Cortázar but that of Tim Berners-Lee and his spiritual progeny – that progeny which is ourselves, I the author of these pages whose first version I launched, in Spanish, into cyberspace, and you, the person who will read these and similar writings, these “*textos [que], claro, son solamente textos*” (“texts [which], of course, [are] only texts”), yet texts which are also part of that great evolving text which is the Internet.

#### NOTES

1. Cortázar translated all of Poe’s tales into Spanish, as well as a considerable part of the rest of the US author’s work. Borges, himself strongly influenced by Poe, “discovered” Cortázar and was instrumental in securing publication, in 1946, of Cortázar’s first short story to see the light of day, ‘Casa tomada’ (‘House Taken Over’), launching the younger writer as “the short story rival to himself” (Wilson 2006: 123). For an overview of the three-way relationship between Poe, Borges and Cortázar, see Bonells (1988); for a more detailed textual comparison between Poe and Cortázar, see Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan (1996).
2. For a useful account in English (published in India) of *Rayuela* and its experimental status, see Riberi (2001).
3. Berners-Lee, in *Weaving The Web* (1999, Orion Business Books, London) quoted by Crystal (2001: 13).
4. See Castells (2001: 116-136) – “Most on-line communities are ephemeral ... networks of sociability ... the theme around which the on-line network is constructed defines its participants” (p. 130).
5. Friedman (2005) states: “It is now possible for more people to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people ... from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world” (p. 8).

6. See Ramonet (1999: 36). For a discussion of ‘The Library of Babel’ and a critique of Ramonet’s position, see Rollason (2004).
7. “Our society is gearing itself up to possessing an electronic brain constructed on the model of the brain of Funes ‘el memorioso’. The inability to filter out entails the impossibility to discriminate” – Eco (2000: 192).
8. Prego, in Cortázar & Prego (1985: 25).
9. “Otro dato más que interesante es que la imagen que sirvió de matriz a *Rayuela* y que aparece consignada en el log-book o bitácora de la obra, es justamente, la telaraña (web, en inglés)” (“Another fascinating element is the image which served as a matrix for *Rayuela* and is given its due place in that work’s log-book – none other than the web” – Cuadra 2005: 59).
10. Cf. Cortázar 1974, 1980a.
11. Cf. Cortázar 1951, 1998a.
12. Cf. Cortázar 1980b, 1983.
13. For an analysis of ‘Queremos tanto a Glenda’, in relation to Borges’ in many ways similar story ‘El Congreso’ (‘The Congress’) and the concept of the virtual community, see Rollason (2008).
14. Cf. Cortázar 1966a, 1998b.
15. Philip Swanson (2002) comments on this story: “The protagonist seeks, but ultimately fails, to escape from the humdrum world of 1940s Buenos Aires by transporting himself mentally to the mysterious Parisian underworld of the 1860s” (p. 141).
16. Cf. Cortázar 1977, 1998c.

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