

Above all a poet

The Romantic, personal and accomplished verse of Julio Cortázar

Most readers know Julio Cortázar for his exquisitely structured yet troubling short stories, and his jazz-inspired, freewheeling novels. But poetry and poetics occupy a significant place in his work. The back cover of his collection *Pameos y meopas* (two anagrams of *poemas*) refers to him as “above all a poet”. His *Obras completas* include a volume dedicated to poetry that runs to over 1,400 pages. Around 600 pages are taken up by his study of John Keats, written in the early 1950s. In a letter from 1944, he spoke of Keats’s importance: “Keats is blood, the senses, *broad shoulders*”. Cortázar never ceased to be a Romantic.

Yet for all his apparent commitment to verse, in one way or another each of his collections undermines its status as a book of poetry by Julio Cortázar. The critic Rosalba Campa wrote of his “reticence” with regard to his poems. His first collection, *Presencia* (Presence), was published in 1938 under a pseudonym, Julio Denis. It is said he wanted to avoid a row with his father, with whom he shared a first name. In 1971 he published *Pameos y meopas*. The words for “poem” or “poetry” are punned on but missing in the title. A year later he produced a long illustrated prose poem, *Prosa del observatorio* (Observatory Prose), based on a visit to the Jai Singh observatories in Jaipur, India. These free-flowing and very personal reflections on architecture, eroticism and nature belie their prosaic title.

It is difficult, too, to fit Cortázar into the canon of twentieth-century Latin American poets. *Presencia* was heavily marked by the strictures of turn-of-the-century *modernismo* and the influence of Rubén Darío, years after young poets, including Borges, had cast off the supposed shackles of full rhyme and fixed metres. References to Luis de Góngora and the pastoral sit awkwardly alongside those to jazz, Jean Cocteau and Pablo Neruda.

Los reyes (1949; *The Kings*) is Cortázar’s reworking of the Minotaur legend. But after 1938, there were no collections of poetry until the 1970s, by which time Cortázar’s literary reputation was secure. *Pameos y meopas* came out in Barcelona, unlike his novels and stories, until then all launched in Buenos Aires. In the prologue he writes of the poems that “I never particularly believed that there was any need to publish them”. They were too personal, and only ill-advised friends would want to see them in print. But publish them he did, and then again in *Salvo el crepúsculo*, his *Collected Poems*, from 1984.

Save Twilight is not, strictly speaking, a translation of *Salvo el crepúsculo*. The collection is divided into thirteen sections. With the exception of *Presencia* and some occasional pieces, it covers Cortázar’s whole life’s work in poetry. But it is a stubbornly personal anthology. The sections throw together poems from different periods, giving little sense of chronological progression. There are prose interludes that attempt to introduce sequences, but often only complicate matters. This effect is heightened in *Save Twilight*, as although the same poems start and end the two collections, the sub-

BEN BOLLIG

Julio Cortázar

SAVE TWILIGHT

Selected poems

Translated by Stephen Kessler
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headings and order of *Salvo el crepúsculo* are abandoned, as are many of the prose pieces. *Salvo* features poems in landscape format, and others reproduced in Cortázar’s handwriting. These do not make it to the English edition. In defence of Stephen Kessler, the editor and translator, chance or *hasard* was something Cortázar encouraged in his work.

Cortázar also seems to have worried about whether he was any good as a poet. He quotes the Peruvian critic José Miguel Oviedo, who referred to his poems as “movingly bad”. But it is hard to fault Cortázar’s technical abilities. From an early age, he composed sonnets, with dexterity and accomplishment. In *Save Twilight*, we find “A Sonnet in a Pensive Mood”:

Al viento va la cabellera oscura
es toda fruta y es toda venenos
el remar de sus muslos epicenos
inventa una fugaz piscicultura

Kessler translates it thus:

Her dark hair ripples in the streaming wind
she’s made of fruit and also made of poison;
her thighs with their androgynous rowing motion
send fishes swimming toward their spawning
ground.

The original is clever and vivid. An awkwardness often marks Cortázar’s eroticism, but it prompts indulgence of what might otherwise look like voyeuristic excesses. Here one notices a fluidity about the sexuality. The speaker lauds the boyishness of the woman observed; later she’s called an “amazona de mono azul”, an Amazon in what Kessler calls a “blue work-shirt”. Reading the Spanish poems, one senses that the discipline of fixed forms reined in the shambling, expansive tendencies that can make some of Cortázar’s longer prose works, as well as his free verse, quite frustrating. Several verse poems in the collection have been set to music. “Sidewalks of Buenos Aires” was turned into a tango by Edgardo Cantón, in which the nostalgia and longing of Cortázar’s lament for the lost Buenos Aires of his youth are fully felt.

An endearing voice can be heard in many of Cortázar’s love poems. In “The Brief Love” he describes a mysterious encounter:

a slow flame kindling
the rhythmic dance of the bonfire
weaving us together in flashes, in spirals,
going and coming in a storm of smoke –

(So why is
what’s left of me, afterwards,
just a sinking into ashes
without a goodbye, with nothing more than a
gesture
of letting our hands go free?)

In an early, rather controversial poem, Pablo Neruda praised the love of sailors, who kiss and



Julio Cortázar, 1978

then say goodbye. Cortázar reverses this. The lover is the active participant in the encounter, and it is her departure that leaves the lyric voice alone and bereft. The English specifies gender though the Spanish does not need to.

Perhaps Cortázar’s greatest skill was to make

the ordinary world seem strange. His short stories often end magically. He also penned instructions for performing the most everyday of actions, such as climbing stairs. These oblige the reader to think, very carefully, about how one does indeed climb stairs. The long prose

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piece “For Listening through Headphones” describes the disconcerting effect known as the pre-echo, whereby one catches a snippet of music before it starts to play. “Somehow, poetry is a word heard through invisible headphones as soon as the poem begins to work its spell”, he adds. In contrast to stories or novels, “the poem communicates the poem, and it doesn’t try to nor can it communicate anything else”. In Kessler’s edition, the next poem is “To Be Read in the Interrogative”:

Have you seen
have you truly seen
the snow the start the felt steps of the breeze . . .
Have you known
known in every pore of your skin
how your eyes your hands your sex your soft

heart

must be thrown away
must be wept away
must be invented all over again

This is Cortázar at his most charming, with echoes – or “pre-echoes” – of his great friend Alejandra Pizarnik and early Tomas Tranströmer. Throughout his work, Cortázar asks readers to view the world as new, or like an alien just arrived from some other planet. Whimsy suits Cortázar’s voice.

We also, perhaps surprisingly, encounter Cortázar at his most directly political. This includes comments on the Argentina of the 1940s and 50s. He felt profound unease living under the government of Juan Domingo Perón. Quitting a university post in Mendoza in the 1940s, partly in protest at the rise of the

Colonel’s movement. A sense of social alienation was one of the reasons he left Argentina for Paris in the early 1950s. Yet Cortázar was generally quite cautious in his comments about Peronism, not least because of the movement’s continued popularity with the working classes in the country. His earliest, strongly anti-Peronist novels, remained unpublished in his lifetime.

In *Save Twilight* there are poems of social satire against over-ambitious rulers (“Chronicle for Caesar”). Others express disgust at the state of politics and contemporary debate, in which “shrieking rats on their hind legs / fight over scraps of flags” (“The Gods”). In a poem reflecting on the 1950s, he calls Buenos Aires “capital of fear”; in another, not found in the Kessler edition, he ironizes about 1950, “Año del libertador” (year of the liberator), telling Argentines to cry for their misfortune and solitude, their childhoods degraded by film and radio. In the Spanish original he wrote of leaving Argentina because the streets of Peronist Buenos Aires denied him the lifestyle he wanted. We also encounter references to Che Guevara and the murdered Salvadorean poet and revolutionary, Roque Dalton. Not included here, however, are the propaganda verses he wrote in support of the Sandinistas.

Cortázar lists in one prose section of *Save Twilight* the eclectic mix of poets that he and his circle read in the 1930s and 40s: “García Lorca, Eliot, Neruda, Rilke, Hölderlin, Lubicz-Milosz, Vallejo, Cocteau, Huidobro, Valéry, Cernuda, Michaux, Ungaretti, Alberti, Wallace

Stevens, all by way of originals, translations, travelling friends, newspapers, courses, grapevines, ephemeral aesthetics”. The rosters of writers, jazz musicians and philosophers make more sense in his novels, as they are the way in which characters try to give substance to meaningless lives. In lyric poems or the longer prose pieces in this collection, they smack of what the Argentine sociologist Arturo Jauretche called “medio pelo” literature: aspirational touchstones for the middling classes.

In his letters, Cortázar wrote page after page of corrections and suggestions to his translators. At some stage in the 1960s, he seems to have changed his mind about fidelity, going from favouring close versions to criticizing literalness. Kessler displays his own skills as a poet throughout. He seeks a natural flow in English, and this is mostly successful. The title “Malevaje 76” is just about perfect as “Cut-throat Tango 76”. His attitude to rhyme and metre lacks an obvious rationale, at times

attempting to echo Cortázar’s forms, at other moments replacing rhyme with half-rhyme or just overlooking it. In his defence, it is much easier to rhyme in Spanish.

What gets lost in Kessler’s version, not infrequently, is nuance. When Cortázar describes the music he listens to on headphones as “más bien resonantes después de las diez de la noche”, he’s not saying that it sounds “better after ten at night”, but that it is rather loud. In Argentina when you decide to “elegir el menú” you’re not “selecting from the menu”, but picking the set menu. Such things matter in Cortázar. Elsewhere, a character is described as “brincoso por algún percance hípico”; Stephen Kessler has him “hoarse [voiced] today due to some accident of horseplay”. More likely he is in a sulk because of a horse-riding accident, or even that he’s lost at the races. This is a pity. Much of this volume reads very well, and offers a timely showcase for a less widely appreciated facet of this important writer’s work.

Of word and sound

CLIVE WILMER

Oswald von Wolkenstein

SONGS FROM A SINGLE EYE

For Mary de Rachewiltz on her XCth

Translated by Richard Sieburth

With a Foreword by Siegfried Walter de Rachewiltz

40pp. Privately published (Merano)

muse-inspired poetry, and the young Pound was even disposed to wonder if there were any other kinds at all.

The poetry of the Troubadours spread all over Europe, such that poetry and song inspired by it crops up in other languages for the next three centuries or so. The German-speaking *Minnesänger* are perhaps the best-known example. This book begins with an entertaining foreword by Mary’s son Siegfried Walter de Rachewiltz, who was born in another castle, Schloss Neuhaus, in 1946, not long before the family moved to Brunnenburg. He owes his middle name to one of Pound’s enthusiasms: Walther von der Vogelweide, perhaps the most famous of the *Minnesänger*, who sojourned – so legend has it – in Schloss Neuhaus. That may or may not be so. But no one until recently knew anything of another poet who seems to have lived and died there: the one-eyed knight-errant, traveller and songwriter Oswald von Wolkenstein (1376/7–1445).

Oswald lived the true life of the Troubadour, but his name was until recently lost to history. His nearly seventy years of mingled misfortune and adventure seem to have taken him as far afield as Persia, Russia and Sweden, to name but three of the twenty-five countries he mentions in one song. There are now several recordings of Oswald’s songs – a fine one by Andreas Scholl called *Songs of Myself* issued by Harmonia Mundi – most of which suggest that he was more than worth recovering. It is music that Pound would have loved but, more than that, Oswald has the kind of poetic personality that especially appealed to the great modernist – the individuality that makes for true invention. The persona presented in the poems is erratic, self-deprecating, cantankerous and roguish. He is very far from any ideal, as his one eye shown in the only portrait reminds us. He calls to mind such medieval poets as François Villon and Li Po (or Li Bai) – in Pound’s account of them at any rate.

Sieburth, it must be conceded, is no rival to Pound as a translator, but he renders some ten cycles that whet the appetite and it is good to know more of the poems. Perhaps his work will stimulate a taste for this fierce original and, in the process, contribute to the cult of *motz el son*.

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