

The Double as Defense in Cortázar's *Hopscotch*

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In psychological terms, fragmentation of a character always involves defensive maneuvers to some degree; indeed, the concept of defense is basic to decomposition. The double motif is pervasive in Julio Cortázar's famous novel, *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*; 1963) and performs numerous psychological and formal functions. However, commentary in this study is limited to those situations in which doubling assumes a principal role in the representation of a variety of defensive adaptations.

Although the concept is quite common in literary criticism, the term "double" still provokes considerable confusion and, as Albert J. Guerard has declared, "no term is more loosely used by casual critics of modern literature. . . . Almost any [character] can become a double."¹ Therefore, before beginning my analysis, it seems wise to clarify the terminology employed in the paper.² For the purpose of this commentary, the terms "doubling," "fragmentation," and "decomposition" are considered to be synonymous. At times, the expression "double" is used as the equivalent of the phrases "alter ego" and "compound character"; normally, the context clarifies whether the word "double" refers to one-half of a duality, to a pair of characters, or to a group of interdependent and interrelated characters.

The concept of anxiety is prominent in psychology. When the individual suffers from an anxiety, generally the sign of a real or imaginary danger, he has to take measures to reduce his distress. At times, the ego is able to employ rational methods, but if these are insufficient, he makes use of irrational protective measures. These defense mechanisms³ reduce anxiety, but they do so by means of distorting reality, instead of making a direct confrontation with the problem. This action in turn creates a rupture between "true" reality and the way in which the individual perceives reality. Nevertheless, the various defense mechanisms, which normally are used in combination rather than individually, "are essential for softening failure, alleviating anxiety and hurt, and protecting one's feelings of adequacy and worth. . . . [Therefore] we may consider them to

¹From his introduction to a special number, "The Perspectives of the Novel," *Daedalus* 92 (1963): 204.

²The nomenclature pertaining to the double is primarily from Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970) 4-5.

³The material on defense mechanisms is based upon Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, trans. Cecil Baines (New York: International Universities Press, 1946) passim. I am grateful to Dr. Bert Somers, a member of the psychology faculty of California State University, Los Angeles, for having read the study and assured me of the technical accuracy of my observations.

be normal adjustive reactions unless they seriously interfere with the effective resolution of stress situations."⁴ This is apparently what happens at the end of *Hopscotch*, when Oliveira either commits suicide or goes mad. Logic and the various defensive tactics he has employed up to that point are no longer effective, and the only recourse left open to him are death or the ultimate mechanism of defense, schizophrenia. But before reaching such an extreme, Oliveira has availed himself of a lengthy series of defensive strategies which are portrayed by means of his several alter egos. The following observations, with certain exceptions, are intended to be a detailed summary of the principle defensive functions of the double in *Hopscotch*.

As one might suppose, fragmentation is related logically to the defense of projection, in which the individual attributes the responsibility for his own errors, defects, and unacceptable impulses to other persons. In extreme cases, this mechanism can produce paranoid reactions, as in the confrontation between Oliveira and Traveler which occurs in Chapter 56. This episode, which takes place in the insane asylum where both have gone to work after Oliveira's return to Buenos Aires from Paris, is an excellent illustration of the struggle for dominance of one side of the personality over the other.

Alone in his room, Oliveira decides that Traveler, his lifelong friend, is coming to kill him. For that reason, he sets up an elaborate system of defenses which consists of threads strung among the furniture, pans of water on the floor, and several handfuls of ball bearings strewn about the room. The word "defense" or one of its derivatives, is mentioned no fewer than seventeen times in the twenty-two pages which comprise the chapter. Oliveira is determined to defend himself from his double, whatever the cost.

At one point, he decides that it would be more effective to attack rather than to defend, but he soon changes his mind. In Chapter 118 of the novel, Cortázar cites an enigmatic quotation from Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*: "How shall the murdered man convince his assassin he will not haunt him?"⁵ As Oliveira awaits Traveler's arrival, the meaning of Lowry's words becomes abundantly clear: "If in fact Traveler could kill him (and there was some reason for his mouth being dry and for the fact that the palms of his hands were sweating abominably), everything moved to deny that possibility on one plane in which its occurrence in fact would not have any more confirmation than for the murderer. But it was better yet to feel that the murderer was not a murderer, that . . . defense was then the best attack . . ." (56: 335-36). The murderer is not a murderer because victim and killer are one and the same, an epiphany that Oliveira gradually achieves toward the inevitable confrontation

⁴James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*, 5th ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1976) 131.

⁵Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966) 347. All references are to this edition, and are cited in the text by chapter and page to assist those who may wish to refer to the original Spanish or to another edition of the translation.

with his doppelgänger. In this climactic scene, the psychological point of the book is unmistakably revealed: Oliveira and Traveler are two opposing selves, complementary sides of a single psyche in conflict.

Oliveira is obsessed by thoughts of self-defense because he recognizes the danger incarnate in his alter ego. Traveler is everything he has not wanted to be, and represents the facets of his personality that he has repressed: ". . . basically Traveler was what he might well have been with a little less cursed imagination, he was the man of the territory, the incurable mistake of the species gone astray . . ." (56: 347). And he has ample reason for defending himself, because he realizes that one of them must die (if only symbolically) so that the other may continue to live.

Other examples of projection abound, but it is sufficient to recall the scene of Rocamadour's death to illustrate the point. Horacio discovers early in the evening that the child has died, and as the Serpent Club members arrive at the gathering, he takes them aside to inform them of the situation. Only La Maga is unaware of her son's death as the conversation, music, and drinking all continue as if nothing had happened. When La Maga finally discovers that Rocamadour is dead, Oliveira is unable to offer her the slightest sympathy; he is simply incapable of that emotion. Besides, to express sympathy under those circumstances would be for Oliveira an unauthentic act: "[He] told himself that it would not be so difficult to go over to the bed, squat down beside it and say a few words in La Maga's ear. 'But I would be doing it for myself,' he thought. 'She's beyond anything. I'm the one who would sleep better afterward. . . . Me, me, me. I would sleep better after I kissed her and consoled her and repeated everything these people here have already said'" (28: 170-71). Needing to avoid hypocrisy at all costs, Oliveira imputes to his double Gregorovius the compassion that he unconsciously desires for himself, but which frightens him at the same time. He fears "falling into pity" and "fitting into the mold" because these acts provoke great anxiety within him. By projecting this compassion, or pity, to his double, he encapsulates it, or isolates it, which in reality is an attempt to control it and at the same time to repudiate it.

This incident of the child, as well as most of the episodes with Pola and La Maga, also exemplify the defenses of emotional isolation, rationalization, and intellectualization. In emotional isolation, the individual reduces his emotional participation in situations which can disillusion or harm him. By means of fragmentation, he can be an "active spectator," experiencing life vicariously. Thus when Rocamadour, Pola, and (probably) La Maga die, the loss causes him less pain. At the same time, by rationalizing his inaction in the face of these tragedies, his lack of compassion, or his inability to communicate, Horacio Oliveira justifies himself to his doubles, Gregorovius and Etienne, in effect justifying himself to himself, and simultaneously reinforces, from his own perspective, the appropriateness of his attitude.

Related to the two mechanisms which we have just examined, intellectualization avoids a painful reaction by utilizing a rational explanation which removes the personal significance and the anxiety from the incident. Moreover,

"cynicism [one of Oliveira's most notable attributes] may become a convenient means of reducing guilt feelings over not living up to one's ideals."⁶ If Pola dies of cancer at least she has not suffered; if Rocamadour dies while still an infant, at any rate, as Ronald (another double) observes, "This is all so absurd" (28: 171), and the child will no longer have to suffer through this absurd life; if La Maga drowns, at least, Gregorovius tells Horacio, "Lucía is better off at the bottom of the river than in bed with you" (31: 183). Once again, the defensive maneuver is carried out through decomposition..

As these examples indicate, Horacio exhibits an almost pathological fear when confronted with the possibility of becoming emotionally involved with another human being. For Oliveira, fragmentation is the ideal way to avoid the "sacrosanct castrating obligations" (21: 95), such as a wife, a home, children, and a job, which he is unable to accept. The world's complexity provokes a chaos within him, and his view of the universe serves as a perfect rationalization for avoiding involvement. Like Juan Pablo Castel in Ernesto Sábato's *El túnel*, Horacio suffers from what psychologists refer to as "aboulia," or what Gregorovius defines as "thingness, that unpleasant feeling that where our presumption ends our punishment begins. . . . I mean that Oliveira is pathologically sensitive to the presence of what is around him. . . . In a word he can't stand his surroundings. More briefly, he has a world-ache" (17: 67). In confronting life's complications, fragmentation is his best defense, since he projects to his doubles the characteristics he does not desire for his own personality.

Oliveira has attempted to repress these undesired emotions and character traits, but mere repression has not been adequate to his needs. For that reason, it has been necessary for him to employ more powerful defenses. One of these is reaction formation, in which the individual develops attitudes and modes of conduct diametrically opposed to those which are causing him intolerable anxiety. In Oliveira's case, what he fears most is love, compassion, or any other form of emotional commitment. In order to diminish his anxiety, he constructs a facade of hardness and cynicism. In his way, he erects obstacles which reinforce his repressive behavior, and at the same time impede the formation of behaviors and attitudes which he is unable to accept consciously. Nevertheless, each of his doubles manifests one or more of the characteristics that Horacio wishes to avoid. As I indicated earlier, Traveler symbolizes what Oliveira might have become had he remained in Argentina, and that Oliveira in turn represents the fulfillment of his friend's wishes. To complete the portrait, Gregorovius is a European version of Oliveira: urbane, sophisticated and, in his own words, "more human." In Freudian terms they represent, respectively, the id, the ego, and the superego.⁷

⁶Coleman 127.

⁷Cortázar would probably have been more comfortable with the terms *cronopio*, *fama*, and *esperanza*, the expressions that he himself employs to categorize human psychology. See Julio Cortázar, *Cronopios and Famas*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) *passim*.

With the doubling device, *Hopscotch* is able to satisfy one of the requirements which Simon O. Lesser declares as necessary to great works of literature: a balanced appeal to the principal parts of the human psyche.⁸ Oliveira, Traveler, and Gregorovius together form a single complete individual, a compound character which combines the qualities of sensuality, prudence, and idealism. Oliveira's lack of love and compassion nevertheless carries with it some difficulties. Guilt feelings increase unconsciously within him, and these in turn create, also unconsciously, the need for expiation. This latter defense mechanism also operates by means of doubling. Horacio experiences considerable difficulty in loving La Maga and in feeling any sort of compassion. Gregorovius represents a balance. His compassion is sincere, and even Horacio recognizes that he is in love with La Maga: "Ossip will follow six feet behind you with his hands clasped in an attitude of humble reverence" (20: 87). Moreover, the love which Traveler feels for Talita compensates for the lack of love, fidelity and comprehension which La Maga (Talita's double) has suffered throughout her relationship with Oliveira. Even Etienne and Ronald, two more of Horacio's doubles, in a lengthy recollection of La Maga (Chapter 142), give her the credit due her by reciting a litany of her virtues. That La Maga has already disappeared and is perhaps dead in no way diminishes the value of the scene as a manifestation of the defense of expiation.

The denial of reality is another defense mechanism which stands out in *Hopscotch*. In the accommodation of grief, the individual's first reaction when faced with the loss of a loved one—even when the recognition of love is delayed, as in Oliveira's case—is, logically, denial. La Maga is not dead, Horacio tells anyone who will listen, and upon his return to Buenos Aires he sees her on several occasions: first, on board the ship which is transporting him to Argentina, then under the San Martín Avenue bridge, and finally in the courtyard of the insane asylum in the person of Talita. In spite of her protestations to the contrary ("I'm nobody's zombie, Manú, I don't want to be anybody's zombie" [133: 521]), she realizes that she has been transformed into La Maga. As a matter of fact, she has been intuitively aware of the metamorphosis since her first meeting with Horacio, but has been unwilling to admit it, even to herself. Traveler also recognizes the transformation, and assists in the process of denial, although he fails to realize his role, when he replies to Talita after she has told him that La Maga has drowned: "She isn't the least bit drowned" (133: 521).

Having moved through the stage of denial, the aggrieved person, in this case Oliveira, passes to the defense of sublimation. From this perspective, La Maga was virtuous, perhaps even saintly. If she had defects, they were as nothing when compared to her good qualities. In this context, the scene between Ronald and Etienne, cited previously, acquires yet another dimension, since it reinforces the act of sublimation.

⁸Simon O. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious* (New York: Vintage books, 1962) 112.

Finally, Horacio reaches the most difficult stage: the accommodation to reality. His Maga has died, but Lucía continues to live in Talita, in Traveler, and in Oliveira himself. Within the novel's context, "Maga" means "freedom," and La Maga herself is a roadway to that freedom, which has many names in *Hopscotch*. But Lucía lights the way to the encounter: "In that way La Maga would cease being a lost object and become the image of a possible reunion—no longer with her but on this side of her or on the other side of her; by her, but not her—" (48: 292), a reunion which is the object of the search. At the end, whether in death or in madness, Oliveira finds the coveted "complete reconciliation with himself and with the reality in which he lived" (19: 80). He comes face to face with freedom, even if only for a moment. Either of the two possibilities, suicide or madness, serves to fix for eternity that instant of harmony, to prevent its destruction, and to prove that the search makes some sense, that it is possible at least to find *something*.

I should like to conclude these observations about the defensive functions of decomposition in *Hopscotch* with a brief commentary on the defense of regression in the novel. Oliveira's return to Buenos Aires is symbolic and psychological as well as literal. During his stay in Paris, Horacio thinks constantly about Argentina and his childhood, and his friends never allow him to forget that he is a "Frenchified Argentine." Furthermore, it is significant that, immediately following his encounter with Emmanuèle (whose name denotes salvation), when they are in the paddy wagon, he begins to think about the game of hopscotch and its symbolic meaning: "Hopscotch is played with a pebble that you move with the tip of your toe. On top is Heaven, on the bottom is Earth, it's very hard to get the pebble up to Heaven, you almost always miscalculate and the stone goes off the drawing. But little by little you start to . . . learn how to leave Earth and make the pebble climb up into Heaven . . . [but] the worst part of it is that precisely at that moment . . . childhood is over all of a sudden" (36: 214).

When we see him next, Oliveira is back in Argentina, having made a symbolic return to the past and to his childhood, an idea reinforced by the presence of Gekrepten, one part (the others are La Maga, Pola, and Talita) of the fragmented maternal figure, decomposed because of Horacio's unbearable ambivalence toward women. Very little is known about Gekrepten, but her condition as surrogate mother is further evidence of Oliveira's regression, through which he withdraws from reality and returns to a personal state which demands less, which implies reduced aspirations and more easily obtained satisfactions, and which presents fewer dangers. In effect, he has returned to his childhood home which was inhabited by a *maga*, or sorceress, who in reality lives in every house where there are children.

Like several other distinguished Spanish-American writers (Borges, Carlos Fuentes, García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa, to mention only the most obvious) Julio Cortázar makes extensive use of decomposition in his fiction. Although the author uses the device for a variety of purposes, formal as well as psychological, this brief study has examined, through representative samplings, the primary defensive functions of doubling in *Hopscotch*. The concept of defense

implies discord, and the book is replete with all manner of conflict, endopsychic as well as intrapsychic. Through the use of fragmentation, Cortázar has been able to invest his novel with remarkable psychological depth, perhaps even more than he intended if we are to believe his numerous pronouncements on the subject.⁹

⁹See, for example, *Hopscotch*, 62: 361-63; and Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 237-38.