

Julio Cortazar's story "Axolotl" is interesting in its concern with the mentality of exile, and the irony with which this mentality is faced. The story shows that exile can lead to a shifting in the groups with which one aligns oneself, and even a reworking of personal identity. The narrator starts out as a foreigner in Paris, going to distinctly French places like the Jardin des Plantes. But at the Jardin he becomes fascinated not with French fauna but with Mexican salamanders, the axolotl. The salamanders are themselves exiles, removed from their country and literally trapped in Paris; they are immobilized between glass walls, and seemingly frozen in the larval stage indefinitely. It is no wonder that the narrator sees himself in them, that "after the first minute [he knows] that [they are] linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling [them] together" (4).

These elements of "Axolotl" seem to parallel the Boom writer's shift away from regionalization (interest in and appealing exclusively to one's own "group") and towards literature that could be universally appreciated; in fact, the narrator seems almost a gross exaggeration of the Boom writer's state of mind. The narrator identifies not with his own countrymen or even his own species, but with fantastical salamanders whose most intriguing characteristic is their Mexicanness and their bizarre gills. He may even be a precursor for the sort of literature that is to be the future of Latin America; rather than being interested in the experience that is readily available to him, he falls for the axolotls and learns about their natural life cycle at the library. The ensuing identification becomes so strong that he no longer needs to pay attention to its subject; he begins to embody the subject of his obsession. The story thus seems to embody both the hopes and the dreams of the Boom. On the one hand, taking something (a salamander, a book) out of its native context can

paralyze it, but on the other it permits the consumer of this object to identify with its uniqueness.

V4

Jess - when are you going to
become a literary critic? I'm serious -
you're fabulous
This is a beautifully crafted, concise, insightful essay
You create little gems of essays w/ that scintillating
wit & years - set yourself to grad school!