

THE PURSUER

Julio Cortazar

Reading http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Julio_

Overview

Julio Cortazar (1914-1984) was born in Brussels, child of Argentine diplomatic parents, and after the War, in 1919, returned to live in his native Argentina. His father left the family home when Julio was six, and he was raised by his mother in a suburb of Buenos Aires. (He says he spent most of his childhood time in bed, reading.) In his late teens he obtained a teaching certificate, and went on to teach French in Argentinian high schools, and to work both as a translator and for UNESCO in France. Three times involved in deep romantic relationships, he was a fervent supporter of Castro's Marxist Cuba. He died leaving behind a rich body of novels, stories and essays, and figures as one of the decisive creators of the Latin American literary Boom.

Story

Cortazar's story opens with the narrator paying a visit to his old friend Johnny, a bebop genius living in Paris, and modelled on the jazz master, Charlie Parker. The hotel room is a mess, bottles and syringes lying everywhere; Johnny has just come off a bout of drinking and heroin, and in addition has lost his sax, which has left him and his new girlfriend in a rotten mood. Johnny has an important concert session coming up, and the narrator takes pains to calm him. The sight of the musician's wasted naked body, emerging from the covers as the narrator leaves, is enough of a downer to make the narrator wonder, if perhaps the end is near.

In the subsequent days, the narrator makes efforts to determine who has been supplying drugs to Johnny. He is able to eliminate one of the chief suspects, Tica, and to narrow his search down to Dedee, Johnny's girl. The narrator is about to lay it onto Dedee when Johnny arrives, talking about the concert that will take place that night. He is in a great mood, moderately high, and ready for action.

In the episodic fashion of the story, the next scene puts us in the narrator's mind, as he sits through the intermission of Johnny's concert, and reflects on the mind-work that Johnny is carrying out in his art. He sees that this art is Johnny's way of seizing hold of reality, which is forever slipping away from us.

Four or five days later, the narrator learns from a musician buddy of Johnny that there has been a serious event. The police reveal that Johnny, who has been acting out a great deal in recent days, has set his hotel room on fire, and tried to escape by running naked through the corridors. He is now in the hospital. A few days later the narrator receives a call from Dedee; Johnny wants to see him.

In the hospital, emaciated but lucid, Johnny describes the recent dreams he has been having; hallucinations about urns filled with ashes of the dead, riffs on the transformation of a loaf of bread, which Johnny has just been cutting. The narrator reflects that Johnny is no genius lost in the clouds, but an unusually real human being, hungry for reality.

The narrator next sees Johnny in a café beside the Seine, where Johnny is talking with a couple of his female admirers; in the midst of conversation Johnny goes over to Bruno, the narrator, kneels at Bruno's feet, and begins to weep. He has received the news that his daughter has died. Later, Bruno and Johnny walk over to the river and talk about the narrator's biography of Johnny, which has just been translated from French into English.

Johnny feels that Bruno's biography has missed the real points of his subject, his illnesses and oddities, and above all his visions. The narrator reminds Johnny of his personal decision; to exclude from the biography many personal, and possibly compromising, details.

A short time later Johnny and a couple of his girl friends move back to New York, and Bruno learns that Johnny has died from a severe drug overdose. The narrator adds a fitting obituary notice to the second edition of his biography.

The dry tone, with which Bruno has all along described a reckless and brilliant artistic life, leaves the reader alone with our volatile and visionary friend.

Themes

Art. Johnny is devoted to his art. His saxophone is the means to the discovery of artistic reality, and he is willing to sacrifice his health and sanity to the music the sax can make.

Drugs. Drugs and art belong together for Johnny, who is depicted as a bebop genius from the era of Charlie Parker (1920-1955). Drugs flowed through the musical culture of that era, and gave life while taking life.

Vision. Johnny was subject to visions, which involved forms of 'going to the other side,' and putting himself in abnormally close touch with reality.

Characters

Johnny is the protagonist, a brilliant bebop saxophonist who finds his religion—he does not believe in God—in the reality of his music. Drugs are Johnny's necessary stimulant, for the far reaches of his art, and yet are at the same time the destruction of his body, the ravaged form of which, in Johnny's hotel room, is a shocking alert to the price Johnny has paid for the formation of his genius.

Bruno is the narrator of *The Pursuer*, and the author of the biography of Johnny, which has brought the two together. Bruno loves Johnny for what he is, a down to earth person who can only sustain his reality by soaring into realms of artistic greatness.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Johnny (Passionate)

Character Johnny Carter, the bebop musician at the center of the narration of *The Pursuer*, is a volatile and brilliant improvisational sax player, living in Paris at the time of the story, and to all appearance modeled after the jazz genius, Charlie Parker. We know Johnny through the accounts of his biographer, a modest academic type who filters to us our understanding of this startling and unpredictable genius, whom the narrator visits frequently. Johnny is especially brilliant when he explains the mindset of the jazz musician when inside the creative process; Johnny collapses time around him, freely expressing his need for stimulants, and lurching from one affection to another. He is passionate enough to be self-destructive.

Parallels The heart of this novel is the fascination felt by the narrator for the brilliance and pathos of a great musician. One finds this kind of friendship-admiration in Biblical figures like David and Jonathan, (Book of Samuel, 630-540 B.C.), or in the admiration of Pylades for Orestes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 B.C.). Admiration for the genius is built into the modern temper, for all its faith in 'democracy.' Hegel, in his *Encyclopædia* (1817), sees the 'great man'—Napoleon preoccupied him—as part of the meaning-structure of unfolding human history; Thomas Carlyle, in *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), argues for the importance of 'great men' as leaders in history.

Illustrative moments

Depressed We first meet Johnny on a visit from the narrator—to the musician's pretty squalid apartment in downtown Paris. It is a bad moment for Johnny, because he has some well-paying gigs just ahead, but has lost his sax, stored it between his legs on the metro, then got off without remembering it. His girlfriend is pissed off big time, and Johnny is depressed. Johnny is 'wrapped up in a blanket, and squeezed into a raunchy chair that's shedding yellowed hunks of old burlap all over the place.' A single unshaded light bulb diffuses an ugly glow over the wood floor.

Distracted Johnny is both absorbed by the loss of his horn, and distracted by the fancy of considering the nature of the time that separates him from his gig. (He is full of profound but fleeting insights into the nature of time.) Almost anything, especially including stimulants, can undercut even his interest in time: 'I'd feel a lot better if I could forget about time and have something hot to drink.' At this the narrator pulls out a bottle of rum from his overcoat! Cigarettes, rum, and Nescafe set fire to the dreary room.

Brilliant Johnny expounds on the reasons why time interests him so much. (He is interested especially in the compression of extensive lived time into the pregnant units of that other time, musical expression.) His childhood home was full of conflict, 'from one fistfight to another, almost not stopping for meals.' But 'music got me out of time,' or, more carefully put, 'music put me *into* time.' The time he got into, in a freeing way, was the compressed and fragmented time his genius-compacting experience in music guaranteed him. In that musical time he was immune to the background of family conflict.

Egoless The distinctive character of Johnny's genius is that he is without ego. Because he is more profound than his musical peers, he feels no desire to assert that depth or his own genius. He ascribes no thoughts to himself, believes that he has a totally empty head, and above all that thoughts, such as they are, do not belong to individuals. 'How's it funny to realize that you've thought of something? Because it's all the same thing whether you think, or someone else. I am not I, me. I just use what I think, but always afterwards, and that's what I can't stand...'

Spontaneous Johnny's preoccupation with time appears to batten on his sense of what his own music is. 'I'm playing that tomorrow,' a phrase Johnny warms to, 'suddenly fills me with a very clear sense of it, because Johnny is always blowing tomorrow, and the rest of them are chasing his tail in this today he just jumps over, effortlessly, with the first notes of his music.' Johnny's spontaneity and antic good humor spring from the native genius he gives vent to best, unfortunately, when he has a good jolt of cognac or heroin to work from.

Discussion questions

Does the narrator feel both admiration and concern for the musician? What steps does he take to care for the guy?

What was the role of jazz in the musician's life? Had jazz saved his life?

Is the narrator, in this novel, identical with the author? Or is the narrator a character separate from the author, with whom the author may or may not agree?