Persio (In Julio Cortázar, *The Winners*) **introvert**

Overview Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) was born in Brussels, child of Argentine diplomatic parents, and after the War, in l919, 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.

Character Eighteen residents of Buenos Aires win a lottery, which entitles them to a cruise vacation. (Destination unknown to the winners.) As the group assembles, at a restaurant in downtown Buenos Aires, we become conscious of one person who has not yet arrived—who went back to get things. It is Persio, questionably a relative of one of the winners, and a proof reader for a large company in the city. Persio is a kind of mystic and outsider, an explorer of remote possibilities, whose presence punctuates the novel, in the form of soliloquies or interjections, which carry the mundane conversations of the people—who are 'cross-section normal'—onto more evolved planes.

Parallels Persio is a down to earth proofreader, used to looking closely at details, and at the same time an on-the-margins figure with mysterious insights into reality. The formula is hard to replicate: in Homer one finds Circe, a magician who enchants Odysseus and his men, and in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 B.C.) Teiresias, who is a seer and prophet, his eyes fixed on the deeper reality in the daily; In Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1610) we meet Sycorax, a magic wielding female indigene, and Prospero, the Duke of Milan and a sorcerer, who holds airy control over the reality on his island. One cannot forget, in this list, a wizard like Harry Potter (star of a series of books, the first out in 1997), who lives both in our daily world and mysteriously beyond it.

Illustrative moments

1 Mysterious Persio is being awaited, as the small group of lottery winners assembles in the London café. His distant relative, Claudia, has an idea where he is: he has probably remembered some 'item he had forgotten to lock up in his mysterious room in Chacarita, where he accumulated books on occultism and manuscripts of his own which would probably never be published.' This 'nocturnal stroller along the waterfront and streets' of his quartier seems, according to Claudia, to be particularly in need of a rest. Suddenly, at the last minute, Persio arrives. What does he bring? 'News from the star.'

2 **Mystical** Persio shares an in-language—code, trendy, private—with Claudia's child, Jorge. 'I have news of the octopat,' says Persio, settling into private talk with Jorge. This mysterious octopat seems to 'live' in Persio's typewriter, and is complaining that Persio is going on a trip without him. Jorge asks what the octopat will eat, while Persio is away, and is told, by Persio: 'matches, lead from pencils, telegrams, and a can of sardines.' We need no more introduction to the kind of guy Persio is: private, witty, whimsical, addicted to mysteries. Reminded that he may want to look at the stars, from shipboard, Persio remarks that he has 'star telepathy.'

3 Speculative While the assembling company stands waiting, outside the London café in Buenos Aires, Persio observes them in all their randomness, and extrapolates views of the multiple meanings the upcoming voyage can have. 'He does not know any more about the rules of the game than they do, but he feels that they are in the process of being born from every one of the players, as on an infinite chessboard between mute opponents.' He observes this mixture, verging on the dreadful, and can still compare it to a 'comedy of squirrels.'

4 **Speculative** Both Claudia and Jorge press Persio to tell them what kind of constellation of forces he sees emerging from the random human collection assembling for the present cruise. He replies that he sees a harmony and rhythm forming from the group, and feels that the struggle to form, from within the group, will be as tearing as the struggle of the stars to form their own harmonies**.** 'On certain nights l've lived through the war of the stars, an unbearable game of tensions.' 'What games will we all play,' he wonders, as he casts ahead of him the joss sticks of possibility.

5 **Imagining** As the ship fills and the engine begins to awaken, Persio feels himself inside a giant beast. Not leaving his cabin, 'Persio already knows what the ship is like, that it is surrounded at this azimuthal moment by two stubborn, dirty tugboats which are going to lure the big mother, copper and iron…pulling her off away from the magnetism of the dock.' Not much later, Persio is (in mind) on the captain's bridge, peering from the commander's tiny window onto the harbor, the receding dock, the intersections of masts, in short onto a cubist painting which the captain himself is constructing by seeing it.

Discussion questions

Does Persio's profession, proof reader, seem to fit especially well with his speculative and prophetical insight into the world? What connection do you see between these two aspects of his life?

How do Persio's fellow travelers view him? Is he an inspiration to them, or simply an oddity?

Of what importance is it, to the meaning of this story, that it takes place on shipboard?