HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

JULIO CORTAZAR

(1914-1984)

Works

Novels
Final Exam, l950
The Pursuer, 1959
The Winners, l960
Hopscotch, 1963
A Model Kit, 1968
A Manual for Manuel, l973

Short story collections
Bestiary, 1951
End of the Game. 1956
Cronopios and Famas, 1962
All Fires the fire, 1966
Blow-up and other stories, 1967
We love Glenda so much, 1980

Biography

Julio Cortazar was born in 1914 in a suburb of Brussels, Belgium; that is, right on the sill of the first World War. His parents were Argentinian, and attached to their nation's diplomatic service in Belgium.

After German troops occupied Belgium, Cortazar, with his parents, moved into neutral territory in Switzerland, where they spent two years. After the war Cortazar's parents moved to a suburb of Buenos Aires, where young Julio grew up, sad, sensitive, and nervous—doubtless in part because of the absence of his father, who left the family when Julio was six. Julio grew even closer to his mother, an avid reader, from whom he picked up favorite texts like those of Jules Verne, who remained a favorite throughout his life.

At the age of eighteen Cortazar acquired credentials for elementary school teaching, and in the next years taught in two high schools in the region of Buenos Aires. In l944 he was appointed Professor of French literature at the National University of Cuyo, in Mendoza, but due to Peronista political pressure he was not long able to keep that job. He resigned, and continued working, both as a translator as an employee of an Argentinian book-trade journal.

In l951 Cortazar emigrated to France, where he remained—though with frequent periods of traveling—for the rest of his life. His life was essentially that of a writer and translator, in France; he also remained consistently involved with political causes, regularly speaking out for human rights in South America, and vigorously supporting the major figures of liberation in the southern hemisphere—Fidel Castro, Salvador Allende, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. During these years in France, Cortazar was profoundly involved with at least four women, two of whom he married. He married Aurora Bernardez, an Argentian translator, as well as the Canadian writer, Carol Dunlop, who died in l982. He enjoyed sustained relationships with the Lithuanian writer, Ugne Karvelis, who especially triggered his latent capacity for political commitment, though he had already years before traveled approvingly through Castro's Cuba.

Cortazar died in Paris in l994, and is buried in Montparnasse Cemetery. The cause of his death is widely attributed to leukemia, though some think he died of AIDS, as the result of a blood transfusion.

Achievements

Questioning. Cortazar's 'experimental' novel, *Hopscotch*, is replete with verbal experiments, that oblige the reader to think back over the text itself, and to consider other ways it could have been constructed. In other words, the reader is prompted to take an active role in creating the work. The work is not viewed as a stable and completed object, but as a transaction.

Political. The verbal questioning adduced above, is connected to a wider questioning, which in Cortazar's fictions aspires to become a kind of political action. He sums up the perspective this way: the purpose of serious fiction is to undermine the assumptions, about propriety and power, which dominate the society in which the work is being created. One might say that this kind of undermining is exactly the kind of power-querying strategy with which Cortazar enters the political community. Nowhere is political domination more ruthlessly enforced, than in the language practices the marketplace allows us.

Mysterious. In a strong sense, Cortazar sheds a provocative mystery over everyday life. In *Winners,* the lottery-winning travelers find themselves enshrouded in the unknown of their voyage, and this pervasive mystery, which seeps down into behavior and conversation on the boat, makes the reader think. The author never fully clears the mystery, which thereby becomes a source of ongoing openness, with new meanings ever implicit in it.

Empathetic. The Cortazar narrator, in *The Pursuers,*goes deeply inside the mind of a great, but disintegrating be bop musician. The narrator himself is skillfully minimized, in the tale, with the result that we live with delight and horror into the brilliant failing movements of the artist before us. When Johnny's daughter's death is announced, it is as though we bear the shock on our own eardrums.

Themes

Games. As noted above, in mentioning *Hopscotch*, Cortazar's fiction makes the reader reflect on what kind of structure a literary work is. The question is raised: could the elements of the work easily be rearranged? Is the power of imagination, which creates the literary work, partly an exhibit of engineering skill, rather than of whole grasp imaginative power, which as Coleridge said, seizes the disparate parts of a perception, and fuses them into a new whole?

Blow up. As in his short story collection, *Blow-up,* Cortazar masters the threatening sense that real and ordinary life can suddenly explode in our faces, letting out onto us the startling horror of the everyday. American readers of Steven King's *The Shining,* for instance, will recognize this proximity of horror. For both authors, there need be little transition between the everyday and dread.

Fate*.* *The Winners* is an extended reflection on fate. The seemingly random individuals, who have gathered for a victory voyage, after winning the lottery, are increasingly unsure of what kind of trip they are on. They are swept up in a destiny which none of them can penetrate. This helplessness before fate is like that of the man on the street, Persio, always in danger of what above we call 'blow-up.'

Transcendence. Johnny, the supreme devotee of the art of bebop, gives all—his passion, his health, his brilliance—to his musical art. This giving up of self, in the *Pursuer*, is Cortazar once again saluting fate. To exhibit your skill to the full, you need to let yourself go completely to what you are.

Characters

Julio Cortazar, a major player in the boom of the new novel in Latin America, brought into fictions a sense of the wired, mystical figure, who is living the deep texture of his own time. **Persio** and **Johnny** are highly imaginative examples of Cortazar's insight into the new visionary of the sixties, Latino style.

Persio is one of the winners, of a Buenos Aires lottery, who is entitled to take an all expense paid ocean cruise. The cruise is itself a mystery; the passengers cannot figure out where they are going; members of the crew keep disappearing into unknown parts of the ship. It is Persio, with his observations of the night

stars, his premonitions of the subtle meanings of ‘winning the lottery,’ and his deep sense of the inter relations among the passengers, who provides an understanding of the journey on the sea, a journey mystical and symbolical at the same time.

Johnny, a great jazz musician in the old days in Paris, is found by the author living in squalor in a small Parisian flat, with his loving girlfriend. Visiting and going on to befriend Johnny, the author increasingly understands Johnny’s brilliance, his total devotion to his music, his failing health. Johnny becomes a beacon of visionary artistic power, for the narrator, just as did Persio, for the still earthbound sea voyagers of *The Winners.*

Cortazar’s socialist humanism, here incarnated in visionaries from humble settings—Persio in real life a careful actuary, Johnny a past-his-prime jazz musician living in a ghetto—is both subtle and intense, and illustrates the intimacy of the personal contact which can join an author to his characters.