

JULIO CORTÁZAR'S *LOS PREMIOS*: THE GAME IS LIFE

Shirley A. Williams

Published in 1960, *Los premios*¹ was Julio Cortázar's first novel. Although immediately heralded as an important new novel,² it was soon eclipsed by his second and best known novel, *Rayuela*. While not as complex a novel as *Rayuela*, *Los premios* deserves careful analysis, for it contains the theme of the game-as-metaphysical-search which Cortázar will later develop more fully in his second work. Similarly, the narrative technique Cortázar uses in *Los premios* both illustrates his dissatisfaction with the stylistic conventions of the realistic novel, and foreshadows the more radical departures from traditional narrative style he will employ in *Rayuela*.

Los premios deals with a voyage aboard a mysterious ship, the **Malcolm**. The passengers, who represent all levels of Argentine society, are the winners of a government lottery. Their prize is a voyage of uncertain destination and unknown duration. The trip is touched with mystery from its nocturnal beginning, but becomes even more mysterious when passengers attempt to speak with the ship's officers. The crew speaks an unknown language and will not allow the passengers access to the vessel's stern. Under repeated questioning, the ship's officer informs the passengers that several cases of a rare form of typhus have broken out among the crew quartered at the stern.

Meanwhile the "voyage" goes nowhere. The ship lays anchor off the coast of Buenos Aires. The frustrated passengers divide into two groups: those who accept the official explanation of typhus, and those who reject this explanation and seek to find a passage to the stern in order to solve the mystery of the aborted cruise. The principal searchers are Medrano, López and Raúl. They are supported in their efforts to penetrate the ship's mystery by Paula and Claudia. Claudia's friend, Persio, a proof-reader given to flights of fantastic imagination, is also a key figure in the search.

When Claudia's young son, Jorge, becomes critically ill, Medrano and the other men force their way to the stern to radio for help. Medrano is killed, and the trip, which had lasted only three days, is abruptly ended. With this plot summary as reference, let us turn to a brief analysis of the novel.

One of the most obvious elements in the thematic structure of *Los premios* is the idea of the game which acts as a *leitmotif* throughout the work. Cortázar establishes this idea in the initial pages of his novel. The passengers are all lottery winners. Thus the entire action of the novel begins with a game of chance. The characters are brought

together by the elements of chance and fate associated with the idea of the game. The trip itself takes on the character of a game:

A Persio le va gustando aislar en la platina la breve constalación de los que quedan, de los que han de viajar de veras. No sabe más que ellos de las leyes del juego, pero siente que están naciendo ahí mismo de cada uno de los jugadores, como en un tablero infinito entre adversarios mudos, para alfiles y caballos como delfines y sáritos juguetones. Cada jugada una naumaquia, cada paso un río de palabras o de lágrimas, cada casilla un grano de arena, un mar de sangre, una comedia de arduas o un fracaso de juglares que ruedan por un prado de cascabeles y aplausos. (pp. 41-42)

Cortázar makes it clear that the players in this game represent all men ("... este barco es una instancia cualquiera de la vida..." [p.232]). The idea of the game thus extends beyond the trip and takes on a more universal meaning. Since all men participate, the game becomes associated with the idea of life itself. The trip is a game and the game is life.

Like all games, the trip has its rules. No one can pass to the stern. Cortázar implies that the stern of the ship has a metaphysical significance. Raul senses this:

... no creo que haya ninguna tomadura de pelo sino que somos víctimas de una especie de estafa. Nada que se parezca a las estafas comunes, por supuesto; algo más... metafísico, si me permiten la mala palabra. (p.150)

The stern thus becomes the symbol of metaphysical knowledge and understanding, "... un punto central donde cada elemento discordante puede llegar a ser visto como un rayo de la rueda" (pp.100, 379).

All of the passengers are involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in a search for meaning in their lives. This is especially evident in Claudia's case. Her monologues reveal the sense of meaninglessness and boredom which she feels. Raúl and Paula also share this feeling of meaninglessness and lack of direction in their lives in Buenos Aires and, like Claudia, take the trip in the hopes that it will offer them an escape (p.40). The hollowness and lack of meaning which characterizes the passengers as individuals is also evident in their relationships with others. Cortázar continually emphasizes the fact that there is an artificiality in their relationships with one another, and he again uses the *leitmotif* of the game in these relationships. Cortázar seems to insinuate that life itself is a game which is lived by playing endless false and meaningless games. All of the characters play the game of social pretense, acting out their roles like players in a masquerade (p.90). The characters use one another in their personal relationships, treating one another like pawns in a chess match. The idea of the game also appears connected with the passengers' social relationships on a more obvious level: many of their social contacts are centered around actual games — Dr. Restelli and Don Galo are brought together by their game of *truco*; Persio and Jorge play chess; all of the passengers (complete with actual masks) participate in the trip's principal social function, a sort of talent-show-game.

The lack of meaning in the lives of the characters and in their relationships with one another seems to be related to the idea of the stern as the symbol of metaphysical knowledge. To reach the stern becomes symbolically to attain the knowledge and

understanding which will give life meaning. Raúl, López and Medrano at times sense this deeper symbolic significance of the stern and are therefore continually attracted to it. But even these three are not completely aware of the significance of the stern because their involvement in the trivial games and past-times on board ship distracts them and keeps them from focusing on the problem of the stern. The trivial even contaminates their attempt to reach the stern — the only really meaningful action — until it too becomes a mere game, something to pass the time if nothing better is available. Medrano realizes this as he thinks that:

Probablemente López y Raúl propondrían un nuevo plan, o él mismo si se aburría en el bar, pero todo lo que hicieran sería más un juego que una reivindicación. (p.196)

But for Medrano, the game becomes a matter of serious importance with Jorge's illness. During the course of the cruise, Medrano has begun to establish a close and meaningful human relationship — perhaps the only meaningful relationship which exists among any of the passengers — with Claudia. Her son's illness therefore affects him much more personally than it does the others. In his attempt to reach the stern he is motivated, perhaps for the first time in his life, by an unselfish desire to help another human being. Since López and Raúl do not share this immediate and personal motivation, they never completely cease to view the assault on the stern as a game. Perhaps this explains why Medrano seems to gain knowledge of himself at the stern while López and Raúl do not experience a similar revelation. At the stern Medrano is reconciled to himself

... echando a rodar como un muñeco de barro al hombre viejo, aceptando la verdadera cara de Bettina. . . [para que] lo viera a su turno como él la había visto, como sólo puede verse lo frívolo en una hora que no está en los relojes. Y así iba todo, y dolía y lavaba. (p.382)

Medrano thus begins to achieve knowledge of himself. He penetrates the mask in order to see his relationship with Bettina, his former lover, as it really was, a meaningless, trivial, and frivolous affair. Medrano's life now begins to take on meaning for the first time as he acts truly and unselfishly on Claudia's behalf, and he experiences a happiness he has never known before. It is, of course, significantly at this point that he is killed.

López and Raúl return without having attained a similar revelation. When it suddenly occurs to Raúl that "... habían estado en la popa, la famosa popa," he thinks, "¿Pero qué había al fin y al cabo en la popa? Y a mí qué más me da. . ." (p.385). In going to the stern, López and Raúl break the rules of the game and are consequently ostracized by the others. Their refusal to sign the statement concerning Medrano's death constitutes another infraction of the rules. But in the end they do conform to the rules of the game, for Cortázar makes it clear that when they return to Buenos Aires they will not cause trouble; they will simply become caught up in the games of their day-to-day existences and forget what went on aboard ship. Cortázar emphasizes the fact that, unlike Medrano, they have remained unchanged by their breakthrough to the stern by having them return to the very cafe from which they had begun the trip and by showing Buenos Aires waiting to transform them all back into what they had been before leaving (p.422).

In summary then, the theme of *Los premios* can be said to be man's search for metaphysical truth and for meaning in his own personal existence. Throughout the novel,

Cortázar shows man to be frustrated in this search by the intervention of the frivolous circumstances of his daily life. Indeed, Cortázar suggests that life is a game and that one of the rules of this game is that man must submit to the domination of the trivial and meaningless. He must continue playing the games which keep him from finding meaning in life. In Medrano's words:

... Supongo que [el juego] forma parte de la concepción actual de la vida, sin ilusiones y sin transcendencia. Uno se conforma con ser un buen alfil o una buena torre, correr en diagonal o enrocar para que se salve el rey. . . Vivir es tener los ojos clavados en las piezas que siguen en juego. (pp.164-165)

Medrano himself is the only character who attempts to escape from the domination of the trivial in order to penetrate to the stern and the meaning and knowledge it symbolizes. It is perhaps significant that he then dies immediately, as if he were being punished for breaking some taboo.

Having established the basic theme of *Los premios*, let us now turn to its structure. How does Cortázar structure his novel in order to convey the elements of his theme? The question of structure is, of course, one of the principle problems of modern novelistic theory. According to Leon Livingston, the chief characteristic of the modern novelist is that he "seeks to express the singularity of a plural universe, the underlying unity of a multifaceted and stratified reality. . ." ³ The modern novelist therefore:

... can no longer accept the merely two-dimensional, chronological technique of observed realism. . . He must create a world that is simultaneously material and spiritual, real and imaginative, factual and fictional, a world in which the base materials of reality are transmuted into imagination while continuing to be what they 'really' are.

The very fact, however, that this new reality is essentially poetic raises monumental problems for the genre which is by nature realistic, that is, the novel. When it seeks to achieve more than its exclusively realistic function authorizes, it becomes a self contradiction and to satisfy its aims must have recourse to nonnovelistic techniques, especially those of painting and music. ⁴

Livingston's statement serves as an excellent starting point in analyzing Cortázar's structuring of *Los premios*. For in *Los premios*, Cortázar seems to be attempting to represent "the underlying unity of a multifaceted and stratified reality." That is, Cortázar attempts to present at least two distinctly different views of the same reality. He does this by presenting the action of his novel from two different perspectives. The main body of the novel, Cortázar's straightforward narration of the action and his characters' reactions to this actions, forms one perspective. Persio's soliloquies, which Cortázar continually interpolates into this main action, form the second perspective. As we will see, Cortázar maintains a strict relationship between these two perspectives; they both deal with the same themes and at times even repeat the same phrases and images.

What then is the essential difference between these two perspectives? In writing the main body of his novel, Cortázar has on the whole utilized the techniques of the realistic novelist. His narration here is rather straightforward. He follows the chronological time order of observed reality and shows the characters thinking and acting rationally and realistically. While the other characters act rationally, Persio represents the irrational or

the instinctive as he remains apart from the action, acting only as a medium or receptor for supra-rational impressions. In writing Persio's interpolations, Cortázar abandons the chronological and rational ordering characteristic of realism and employs instead what Livingston calls "nonnovelistic techniques" which he seems to borrow from modern art, especially modern painting. Cortázar himself gives us the clue to the source of these techniques in Persio's continual references to modern artists and their works, especially to Picasso and Salvador Dalí. This continual reference makes one suspect that Cortázar is attempting to achieve the same effect in Persio's interpolations as these artists achieve in their painting. If this is true, an understanding of the aims and techniques of modern art may help us to understand Persio's interpolations.

What then are the artistic techniques that Cortázar draws upon for Persio's interpolations? Cortázar obviously uses the technique of fantasy in his portrayal of Persio. As an artistic school, fantasy deals with the realm of the imagination. Its concern is the labyrinth of the human mind. In painting,

... fantasy depends on a state of mind more than on any particular style. The one thing all painters of fantasy have in common is the belief that imagination, 'the inner life,' is more important than the outside world.⁵

Persio's world is largely a world of fantasy. His first appearance in the novel is accompanied by a discussion of the octopat (p.28), a fantastic creation of Persio and Jorge's collective imagination. Throughout the novel, Persio retreats from the outside world and the action which is going on around him to take refuge in his own personal world of imagination. This world is, of course, continually reflected in his thoughts which form the interpolations.

Cortázar also draws upon the related artistic technique of surrealism in writing Persio's soliloquies.⁶ Artists of the surrealist movement define their goal as "pure psychich automatism. . . intended to express. . . the true nature of thought. . . free from the exercise of reason and from any aesthetic or moral purpose."⁷ In other words, the surrealist attempts to express subconscious mental activities by presenting images without order or sequence, as in a dream. Cortázar attempts to achieve this same effect with words rather than pictorial images. The following passage from one of Persio's interpolations is typical of many and will perhaps serve to illustrate:

Inseguro de su oído, cerrados los ojos, sabe Persio que sólo el vocabulario balbuceado, el lujo incierto de las grandes palabras cargadas con las águilas con la presa real, replicarán por fin en su más adentro, en su más pecho y su más entendimiento, la resonancia insoportable de las cuerdas. Menudo e incauto, moviéndose como una mosca sobre superficies imposiblemente abarcables, la mente y los labios tantean en la boca de la noche, en la uña del espacio, colocan con las pálidas manos del mosaísta los fragmentos azules, áureos y verdes de escarabajo en los contornos demasiado tenues de ese dibujo musical que nace en torno. De pronto una palabra, un sustantivo redondo y pesado, pero no siempre el trozo muerde en el mortero, a mitad de la estructura se derrumba con un chirrido de caracol entre las llamas, Persio baja la cabeza y deja de tendender, ya casi no entiende que no ha entendido. (p.226)

The images in this passage are fragmented and seem to follow no logical order, yet they do fall into a certain pattern which reveals Persio's mental process as he strives to make

contact with the supra-rational forces which he senses hold the key to understanding. "Vocabulary," "words," "mind," "lips," "mouth," are all instruments of communication. But the vocabulary is "stammered," the words "hesitant." The communication is thus incomplete, composed only of "fragments" and "outlines," and is finally lost entirely.

In addition to using fantasy and surrealism to express internal states of mind and processes of thought, Cortázar also draws upon the techniques of abstract art in order to express the structure of external reality. His description in Persio's interpolations resembles Picasso prints, for like Picasso's paintings, Cortázar's descriptions present fragments of reality whose external identity no longer matters. Just as in Picasso's paintings breasts may turn into eyes, profiles merge with frontal views, and shadows become substances, in Cortázar's descriptions there is an endless metamorphose by means of which he attempts to view reality from every possible angle. For example, in one of Persio's meditations:

... la visión de la proa se le ofrece con la misma innaturalidad que si descolgara una pintura y, sosteniéndola horizontalmente en las palmas de las manos, viera alejarse del primer plano las líneas y los volúmenes de la parte superior, cambiar todas las relaciones pensadas verticalmente por el artífice, organizarse otro orden igualmente posible y aceptable. (p.64)

In another passage Persio realizes that:

... es posible que al nivel del suelo sea el London, que a diez metros de altura sea un torpe tablero de damas con las piezas mal ajustadas a las casillas y faltando a todo concierto de claroscuro y convención estatuida, que a veinte centímetros sea el rostro rubicundo de Atilio Presutti, que a tres milímetros sea una brillante superficie de níquel (¿ un botón, un espejo ?), que a cincuenta metros coincida con el guitarrero pintado por Picasso en 1918 y que fue de Apollinaire. (p.52)

We have said that in spite of the obvious differences in the style in which he writes the main body of the novel and the interpolations, Cortázar maintains a strict relationship between these two parts of his novel. Let us then examine the nature of this relationship. We have said that the theme of *Los premios* can be summarized as man's search for metaphysical truth and meaning in his personal existence in the face of the intervention of the trivial circumstances of his life which continually frustrates this search. Cortázar develops this theme simultaneously in the body of his work and in Persio's interpolations, but we might say that while he develops this same theme simultaneously, he develops it on two different levels. The other passengers conduct their search (symbolized by their attempts to reach the stern) on the rational level. They try to understand the situation on board ship rationally, and then formulate plans and organize expeditions. They seek to reach the stern through rational action. Persio, on the other hand, conducts his search for meaning on the supra-rational level. "No cree Persio que lo que está ocurriendo sea racionalizable: no lo quiere así" (p.65). Persio seeks to gain understanding through passive inaction, by acting as a medium for the supra-rational forces which he senses will reveal the meaning of what is happening.

contact with the supra-rational forces which he senses hold the key to understanding. "Vocabulary," "words," "mind," "lips," "mouth," are all instruments of communication. But the vocabulary is "stammered," the words "hesitant." The communication is thus incomplete, composed only of "fragments" and "outlines," and is finally lost entirely.

In addition to using fantasy and surrealism to express internal states of mind and processes of thought, Cortázar also draws upon the techniques of abstract art in order to express the structure of external reality. His description in Persio's interpolations resembles Picasso prints, for like Picasso's paintings, Cortázar's descriptions present fragments of reality whose external identity no longer matters. Just as in Picasso's paintings breasts may turn into eyes, profiles merge with frontal views, and shadows become substances, in Cortázar's descriptions there is an endless metamorphose by means of which he attempts to view reality from every possible angle. For example, in one of Persio's meditations:

... la visión de la proa se le ofrece con la misma innaturalidad que si descolgara una pintura y, sosteniéndola horizontalmente en las palmas de las manos, viera alejarse del primer plano las líneas y los volúmenes de la parte superior, cambiar todas las relaciones pensadas verticalmente por el artífice, organizarse otro orden igualmente posible y aceptable. (p.64)

In another passage Persio realizes that:

... es posible que al nivel del suelo sea el London, que a diez metros de altura sea un torpe tablero de damas con las piezas mal ajustadas a las casillas y faltando a todo concierto de claroscuro y convención estatuida, que a veinte centímetros sea el rostro rubicundo de Atilio Presutti, que a tres milímetros sea una brillante superficie de níquel (¿ un botón, un espejo?), que a cincuenta metros coincida con el guitarrero pintado por Picasso en 1918 y que fue de Apollinaire. (p.52)

We have said that in spite of the obvious differences in the style in which he writes the main body of the novel and the interpolations, Cortázar maintains a strict relationship between these two parts of his novel. Let us then examine the nature of this relationship. We have said that the theme of *Los premios* can be summarized as man's search for metaphysical truth and meaning in his personal existence in the face of the intervention of the trivial circumstances of his life which continually frustrates this search. Cortázar develops this theme simultaneously in the body of his work and in Persio's interpolations, but we might say that while he develops this same theme simultaneously, he develops it on two different levels. The other passengers conduct their search (symbolized by their attempts to reach the stern) on the rational level. They try to understand the situation on board ship rationally, and then formulate plans and organize expeditions. They seek to reach the stern through rational action. Persio, on the other hand, conducts his search for meaning on the supra-rational level. "No cree Persio que lo que está ocurriendo sea racionalizable: no lo quiere así" (p.65). Persio seeks to gain understanding through passive inaction, by acting as a medium for the supra-rational forces which he senses will reveal the meaning of what is happening.

The phrase "... un punto central donde cada elemento discordante puede llegar a ser visto como un rayo de la rueda" (p.100), occurs first in one of Persio's interpolations (p.100), is then echoed by Medrano's thoughts in the body of the novel (p.379), and then reappears in Persio's interpolations (p.357). Through his use of these and similar techniques, Cortázar is able to fuse two narratives which differ greatly in style and perspective into a single thematic unity.

At this point we might well ask why Cortázar uses the technique of the double narrative. If both narratives develop essentially the same theme, why are both necessary? The answer to this question seems to be found again in the idea of perspective. Reality, as Livingston has said, is multifaceted and stratified. Yet the modern novelist seeks to express the singularity, the unity which is to be found underlying this reality. He attempts to express in short "the singularity of a plural universe." By means of his two narratives, Cortázar is able to express many more facets or levels of the same reality than he would have been able to express with a single narrative. Like Persio, Cortázar seems to believe it his duty "considerar cada situación con la mayor latitud posible" (p.66). He therefore uses Persio's interpolations to present the situation in his novel from what might be called a subjective or internal point of view which shows the fantastic, the irrational, the metaphysical — all the alternative possibilities of the rational, objective, external point of view which he presents in his main narrative. By means of the two narratives, Cortázar, like the modern painter of the abstract school, is able to represent a view of a given reality from several of its possible angles rather than from the single angle afforded by the traditional technique of the realistic novel. But it is left for the reader to fuse these two narratives to create a new reality — a superreality. Cortázar thus draws the reader into the work, forcing him to participate. Like the characters, the reader too is involved in a game. The game is life, and even the reader plays.

The Ohio State University
Lima Campus — USA

NOTES

¹ All future page references are made to the Editorial Sudamericana edition: Julio Cortázar, *Los premios*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1960).

² Reviews include: Emile Capouya, "Passenger List for Limbo," *Saturday Review*, 27 March 1965, p.29; William Goyen, "Destination Unknown — *The Winners*," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 March 1965, p.5; Antonio Pagés Larraya, "Los premios," (en *Ficción*, Bs. As., No. 30-34, setiembre-diciembre 1961, pp.165-169).

³ Leon Livingston, "Interior Duplication and the Problem of Form in the Modern Novel," *PMLA*, 73 (1958), 394.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.394.

⁵ H. W. Janson. *The History of Art* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962), p.527.

⁶ For a more detailed study of the influence of surrealism in the complete works of Julio Cortázar, consult Evelyn Picon Garfield, *¿Es Julio Cortázar un surrealista? [Is Julio Cortázar a surrealist?]* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1975). With reference to Persio's soliloquies Garfield writes:

La prosa analógica en que una imagen parece metamorfosearse en otra parece en muy pocos pasajes sueltos de la obra cortazariana. Tal vez en los soliloquios de Persio, la analogía de la palabra está mas cerca del surrealismo que en ninguna otra parte de su obra (p.218).

⁷ Janson, *History of Art*, p.530.