

## MEMOIRS OF MEDIOCRITY AND DELUSION IN LOS PASOS PERDIDOS

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### Resumen

*El narrador de Los pasos perdidos de Carpentier escoge con gran esmero formulaciones retóricas y alusiones variadas destinadas a impartir una imagen bien específica del autor del relato. Este proyecto narrativo se lleva a cabo mediante una extensa filtración e interpretación de los eventos. El intrincado relato que resulta de tales intenciones ha sido interpretado por la crítica como un comentario mordaz con respecto a la cultura moderna, o bien como una crítica irónica del existencialismo, el Romanticismo, la antropología, el primitivismo o el marxismo. Aunque tales valoraciones puedan ser exactas, en lo que se refiere a tales objetivos temáticos, y otros que se podrían mencionar, se puede argüir que la ironía retórica de la novela se debe principalmente a los esfuerzos de un narrador neurótico en rodearse de un velo de descripciones y alusiones. Es decir, que la función narrativa de este relato de viaje intrincado e intrigante parece a primera vista ser nada más el deseo del narrador de producir una tapicería delicadamente trabajada. Sin embargo, lo que se desprende de un análisis de la manera en que el narrador representa los eventos es el perfil de un hombre sumamente inseguro cuyo síntoma principal resulta ser la angustia profesional de un compositor frustrado.*

Palabras clave: *ironía estilística, función narrativa, personaje neurótico, angustia profesional, narrador no fiable*

### Abstract

*The narrator of Carpentier's Los pasos perdidos carefully selects rhetorical formulations and wide-ranging allusions designed to convey a specific vision of himself to the reader, heavily filtering the relation and interpretation of events in the process. The intricately elaborated narrative has been variously interpreted as a scathing commentary on modern culture or an ironic critique of existentialism, Romanticism, anthropology, primitivism, or Marxism. Although the work can be rightly judged to have accomplished these thematic ends and others besides, I argue that the novel's supreme stylistic irony is that the richly- and intriguingly-wrought account, one which provides a terrain of interpretive possibilities as fertile as any in literary history, can be seen to serve the primary narrative function of cloaking the insecurities of an excessively neurotic character suffering from vocational anxiety.*

Keywords: *stylistic irony, narrative function, neurotic character, vocational anxiety, unreliable narrator*

Good artists give everything to their art, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in themselves... But inferior poets are absolutely fascinating.

--Lord Henry

Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*

In his examination of Alejo Carpentier's legacy among Boom writers, Stephen Henighan refutes Gerald Martin's reference (175) to the novelist's Freudian "orientation," remarking that, "it is hard to imagine a twentieth-century writer whose work displays less evidence of the Freudian heritage than Carpentier" (1010-11). However, the first-person account delivered in the form of a travel memoir by Carpentier's often exasperating protagonist-narrator in *Los pasos perdidos* practically demands a psychoanalytical reading, at least insofar as the practice is popularly understood<sup>1</sup>. The narrator of Carpentier's intricately constructed novel carefully selects rhetorical formulations and wide-ranging allusions designed to convey a specific vision of himself to the reader. This reflects Carpentier's use of a narrative technique characterized by Gerard Genette as internal focalization, in which the implied author, as one of the characters in the story, speaks or writes predominantly in subjective monologue (102-108; 186-203). In his early and influential article on narrative irony in *Pasos*, Roberto González Echevarría pointed to "inexactitudes y discrepancias que invitan a formarse un juicio negativo del narrador." These discrepancies, he maintains, constitute "un código aparte, cuyo significado ignora el protagonista" ("Ironía" 118). The narrator of *Los pasos perdidos* heavily filters the relation and interpretation of events. His unreliability as a narrator reveals itself in the degree to which these narrative decisions betray his foibles, insecurities, and delusions.

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat (346), citing Jean Starobinski, notes the importance in autobiography (real or fictional) of distinguishing between protagonist ("yo-actor") and narrator ("yo-redactor") in order to trace "la evolución del yo-como-era al yo-como-soy." However, given the contention of the present essay that very little, if any, evolution occurs in the principal character, the terms "protagonist" and "narrator" are generally used here interchangeably.

## Memories of the Future

Most critical readings of *Los pasos perdidos* focus on the Latin American sequences (especially the jungle trek and the weeks in Santa Mónica de los Venados), not least of all because these locales witness those episodes indicated by the protagonist as most central to and indicative of his spiritual transformation. However, the narrator's behavior and his retrospective account of that behavior and of his mind set throughout the events in the first chapter deserve carefully scrutiny. They cast doubt on those later epiphanies by exposing, in addition to a persistent childishness, a robust capacity for rationalization that, if anything, can be seen to intensify throughout his travels.

At the start of the novel, the narrator is employed in an unnamed U. S. city—probably New York—as a commercial composer and music director, and has just completed work on a promotional film for a fisheries association. The narrator informs us that the piece has had much success, that he has been paid well for it, and that he has been rewarded with three weeks away from work. He is experiencing, however, a curious restlessness. We learn that he is irritable about, essentially, being on vacation: “. . . liberado, por tres semanas, de la empresa nutricia que me había comprado ya varios años de vida, no sabía cómo aprovechar el ocio. Estaba como enfermo de súbito descanso . . .” (17)<sup>2</sup>. An existential reading would attribute this listless malaise to the anguished abulia of the psychologically isolated “modern” man. According to Jorge Rodrigo Ayora's neo-Marxist interpretation of the novel, the first chapter constitutes, “una de las descripciones más vivas de la deshumanización capitalista que contiene la novela hispanoamericana” (886). While the narrator certainly seems to promote this reading of his condition, the consistently peevish quality of his discomfort resembles more the familiar adolescent complaint of “I'm so bored; there's nothing to do,” while surrounded by books, media, and diversions of every sort.

The narrator's professional hiatus affords him leisure to reflect on the decision to have abandoned his attempts at “serious composition” in favor of a commercial occupation in support of his wife's acting

<sup>2</sup> All references are to the Mexico City edition (1959) of *Los pasos perdidos*.

career: "luego que Ruth y yo hubiéramos destrozado, con nuestra fuga, la existencia de un hombre excelente" (24). These rather hyperbolic meditations along with the dissatisfaction he describes (31) on viewing with friends his latest project (which, despite the effort and talent that produced it, was "a fin de cuentas, una película publicitaria"), seem to conform to what Ayora describes as "la frustración del impulso del hombre por realizarse plenamente en el ejercicio de sus facultades puestas al servicio de su trabajo cotidiano" (886). However, the narrator's commentary regarding his marriage, begun in the novel's opening episode as he awaits Ruth in her dressing room, points to something other than alienation induced by a Marxist sensibility. In addition to despising his own soulless employment (as well as, apparently, the three weeks of liberation from that employment), the protagonist directs his ire toward Ruth's career and her upcoming stage tour which, unfortunately, will coincide with his vacation, leaving him in the city alone:

Tuve como una fogarada de ira contra el estúpido oficio de fingimiento que siempre se interponía entre nuestras personas como la espada del ángel de las hagiografías; contra aquel drama que había dividido nuestra casa, arrojándome a la otra —aquella cuyas paredes se adornaban de figuraciones astrales—, donde mi deseo hallaba siempre un ánimo propicio al abrazo. ¡Y era por favorecer esa carrera en sus comienzos desafortunados, por ver feliz a la que entonces mucho amaba, que había torcido mi destino, buscando la seguridad material en el oficio que me tenía tan preso como lo estaba ella! (12-13)

The angry appraisal of the acting profession which begins the passage is particularly harsh for one who considers himself an artist. After all, Ruth's stage work is not a purely commercial endeavor (which is the objection he claims to have to his own position), but rather a role in the work of a playwright who began as "[un] autor joven servido por una compañía recién salida de un teatro experimental" (10). Ruth has a long-term contract with a successful stage production, a situation which, while no doubt fatiguing and necessarily repetitive, is the envy and aim of every aspiring stage actor. The narrator,

however, belittles the acting profession, and by implication the craft itself, as a mere exercise in make-believe. “Estúpido,” as a qualifier, gives the insult a childish tone, though, suggesting that his irritation is animated more by the effect of his wife’s job on him than by a critical regard for her profession in the abstract. Within the same sentence, as if self-conscious about his initial petulance, he transitions to an excessively lofty condemnation of Ruth’s vocation (“la espada del angel de las hagiografias”) as being responsible for their waning sexual relationship, a situation that impels him (“arrojar”), as though he has no will of his own, toward “la otra”, the welcoming one. Is he hesitant to mention his mistress (Mouche) by name in a passage that began as a contemplation of his marriage? Perhaps, but here he also avoids Ruth’s name, opting instead for the paraphrase “la que entonces mucho amaba.” The suppression of their names, and his subsequent references to his “destino torcido” and to their status as prisoners to their employment, all serve to dignify through writerly pretension his rather quotidian circumstances as a commercial score writer with a busy and successful career-wife and a diverting mistress.

Regarding the protagonist’s impending separation from his wife while she travels with her acting company, this question is never addressed: since he has free time and plenty of money, why not accompany Ruth on tour? One can detect signs that the narrator fears being perceived as the appendage of a famous spouse whose successful career has eclipsed his own, he an unremarkable man who spends his free time with his flighty lover and their circle of acquaintances who flatter his ego. We see early evidence of his wife’s success when he happens upon a shop front displaying “un retrato de Ruth, luciendo diamantes de prestado, para propaganda de un joyero” (18). Is there a hint of vanity in inserting this here? Perhaps we discern the ambivalence of someone who at once resents his partner’s success while still hoping to derive a certain degree of fame or esteem by association. Here again, the narrator displays his quick temper as the recollection of Ruth’s travel obligations “[e] produjo una repentina irritación” (18). This reaction is perhaps a jealous response to his wife’s fame, provoked by seeing her in the advertisement, which in turn reminds him that she is

leaving him behind to tour with her production. However, he justifies the anger by explaining that Ruth was “la única persona que descaba tener a mi lado, en esta tarde sofocante y aneblada. . . Pero otra vez un texto, un escenario, una distancia, se interponía entre nuestros cuerpos, que no volvían a encontrar ya, en la Convivencia del Séptimo Día, la alegría de los acoplamientos primeros” (18). This passage starts in one place, conceptually speaking, and ends up somewhere else entirely: first, the narrator deplors the impending separation from his wife, but then immediately reminds us that their physical relationship (again invoking verbose mytho-religious allusions) has lost its luster. His next thought: “Era temprano para ir a casa de Mouche” (18). The passage as a whole is an inadvertently revelatory (though rather transparent) stream of consciousness in which the narrator, reminded of his wife’s fame by the advertisement, is moved to irritation at both his own insignificance and what he sees as her neglect of him; this reminds him of their unfulfilling (at least for him) sexual relationship, which leads immediately to thoughts of Mouche and how soon he can see her.

The narrator’s resentment of his wife’s celebrity reemerges, only more intensely, on his return from the jungle, even after he claims to have undergone a spiritual rebirth. He remarks that his flying companions on the trip back seem envious of him not for his adventure, but for his marriage to Ruth, who has captured the public’s interest with the high profile search for her missing husband (249). The narrator reacts with disdain to accounts of Ruth’s having abandoned a performance mid-scene to report his disappearance to the press (250), as if her actions could only be explained by some penchant for the dramatic, and could under no circumstances indicate a genuine concern for his safety. The fact that Ruth has ended her career, leaving the theater to devote herself to him, does nothing to attenuate his scathing characterization of her “performance” at his homecoming celebration:

Y observo a Ruth . . . y me parece que interpreta el mejor papel de su vida . . . se hace poco a poco el centro del acto, su eje de gravitación . . . y es su actuación tan matizada, diversa, insinuante, dándose sin dejar

de guardar las distancias, haciéndose admirar de cerca aunque siempre atenta a mí, usando de mil artimañas inteligentes para ofrecerse a todos como la estampa de la dicha conyugal, que dan ganas de aplaudir. (253-254)

The protagonist insists that he doesn't want the spotlight ("Me siento ajeno a todo esto" [254]), but seems unduly annoyed by the attention his wife is receiving. Where is the equanimity that might be expected from someone who has recently undergone the transformative experiences the narrator describes? If anything, he is more captious and petty on his return than he had shown himself to be prior to his journey.

The cruelty displayed by the narrator in his treatment of Ruth (256-259) as he reveals to her his history with both Mouche and Rosario (well analyzed by Mark Millington, 350-351), is hinted at in the first chapter by a seemingly trivial incident which reunites the narrator with the Curator of the Museum of Organography: "Al doblar la esquina doy de cabeza en un paraguas abierto: el viento lo arranca de las manos de su dueño y queda triturado bajo las ruedas de un auto, de tan cómica manera que largo una carcajada" (21). The owner of the umbrella turns out to be the Curator, who is unconcerned with the ruined item. However, the glimpse we are provided of the narrator's giddy reaction to knocking someone's umbrella under the wheels of a car during a rainstorm suggests the attitude of a brat, if not a bully. Signs of his childishness appear again moments later in the Museum when the Curator inquires regarding the narrator's progress in developing a theory of the origins of music. Like a guilty child explaining himself to a parent, the narrator, in an effort to avoid the Curator's disapproval, improvises a desperate and overly-complicated lie (25)<sup>3</sup>. Frustrated by the awareness that he sounds increasingly dishonest, the narrator again loses his temper ("mi vergüenza se vuelve ira" [26]) and shifts the blame very unconvincingly to the Curator, screaming and cursing at him. The Curator's unruffled reaction suggests a pattern of insolence in the narrator: "Impasible, distante,

<sup>3</sup> See Millington (359-361) for a persuasive Oedipal reading of this episode.

el Curador me mira con sorprendente frialdad, como si esta crisis repentina fuese para él una cosa esperada” (26).

Here we see that lying is another propensity of the narrator. He lies to Ruth habitually in concealing his relationship with Mouche. He plans to lie about the authenticity of the primitive instruments that he has pledged to retrieve at the University's expense (opting to have an artisan make them, instead). One might point out, though, that the narrator eventually decides against this latter course. The case could be made, and in fact is made by the narrator himself, that he develops an ethical aversion to lying during his time in Santa Mónica. In justifying his reluctance to enter into a bigamous marriage with Rosario, he maintains that,

. . . pasaron los tiempos de las estafas. Por lo mismo que he vuelto a sentirme un hombre, me he prohibido el uso de la mentira; ya que la lealtad puesta por Rosario a cuanto me atañe es algo que estimo sobre todas las cosas, me subleva la idea de engañarla. . . La conciencia de mi conciencia me impide ya semejantes canalladas. (230-231)

The glaring complication with this otherwise persuasive declaration is that the narrator continues to conceal his marriage to Ruth (“la verdad molesta”) from everyone in Santa Mónica, including Rosario. He seems entirely untroubled by this ongoing deception. Again we detect a puerile rationalization according to which he hasn't technically been dishonest, since he has never explicitly contended that he wasn't married.

Moreover, the protagonist considers leaving behind in Santa Mónica the primitive instruments he had collected for the Curator, only changing his mind, “pensando que el bastón de ritmo, las sonajeras y la jarra funeraria, al partir envueltos en sus esteras de fibra, me librarán de las presencias que todavía turbaban mi sueño en las noches de la cabaña” (243). The obligation he feels regarding his promise to the Curator is less an expression of a newfound sense of honor than a further example of the pseudo-filial shame experienced by the narrator in interactions with his former mentor. It is remarkable that his serenity is not likewise disturbed by the fact that he has

disappeared for weeks, leaving his wife and friends to agonize over his fate. This disjuncture points to a cheerfully naïve and self-absorbed perspective. Any compunction the narrator may have come to feel in Santa Mónica about misrepresenting himself apparently evaporates during his flight home, when he composes the fictional narrative of his imprisonment and escape to sell to an American newspaper (252).

The protagonist's journey is likewise marked throughout with displays of jealous insecurity, infidelity, and blame-casting. In the confrontation with Ruth after his homecoming, he reiterates his indictment of her career, if only to enhance his possibilities for divorce: "Culpé su teatro, su vocación, antepuesta a todo, la separación de los cuerpos, el absurdo de una vida conyugal reducida a la fornicación del séptimo día" (256). When he encounters Mouche several months later, he fixes on her as the cause of his suffering: "Ella es culpable de todo lo que ahora me apesadumbra" (268). Despite his annoyance with Mouche, he has sex with her on rediscovering "esos combates de adolescencia" (269), even though he claims that he deeply loves and plans to return to Rosario, and had insisted in the passage cited above that he couldn't bear the thought of deceiving her (230-231). Just as he had cheated on Ruth with Mouche, then cheated on Ruth and the malarial Mouche (alongside her hammock) with Rosario, he now cheats on Rosario with Mouche. The protagonist apparently sees no contradiction between his blithe philandering on the one hand, and the jealousy he feels toward his lovers on the other. He is jealous of Ruth's fame. He obsesses over Mouche's possible involvement with the Canadian painter whom they meet on their travels: "No podía tolerar la perfidia presente, la simulación, la representación mental de ese "algo" oculto y deleitoso que podía urdirse a mis espaldas por convenio de hembras" (75). And, although the narrator claims to view his relationship with Rosario as essentially different from the others, as somehow more authentic, her opposition to marriage provokes in him a familiar reaction: "Al punto se transforma mi sorpresa en celoso despecho" (233).

In analyzing what he sees as the narrator's narcissistic interactions with the women of the novel, Millington rightly questions "how

much changes in the narrator's gender identity whilst (he claims) so much is changing in the other aspects of his identity" (348). Similarly, regarding the epigraphs with which the narrator begins each chapter, Pérez Firmat observes that they imply "una lectura retrospectiva que no ha derivado ningún beneficio de la distancia que la separa de los sucesos comentados" (350). In the narrator's own recounting of the events one sees no evidence of maturation, of spiritual growth, of any real change in the narrator's patterns of behavior or self-centered motivations. Instead, throughout the narrative, he maintains an inveterate commitment to rationalization, self-pity, and shameless auto-exculpation worthy of Lazarillo or Guzmán. The persistence of these personal qualities throughout the narration, along with a hint that no transformation is likely for the protagonist in the future, is perhaps slyly suggested by the enigmatic name of the tavern in Puerto Anunciación that he visits early in his journey (134), recalls while back at home (264), and returns to (286) at the story's end: *Los Recuerdos del Porvenir*.

Despite his protestations to the contrary, the narrator never transcends the desperate need for self-aggrandizement. In his last moments in Santa Mónica, he reflects on having rid himself of all vanity regarding his musical output:

*Me sentía curado de toda vanidad a ese respecto, aunque me creyera capaz, ahora, de expresar ideas, de inventar formas, que curaran la música de mi tiempo de muchas torceduras. Aunque sin envanecerme de lo ahora sabido—sin buscar la huera vanidad del aplauso—, no debía callarme lo que sabía. Un joven, en alguna parte, esperaba tal vez mi mensaje, para hallar en sí mismo, al encuentro de mi voz, el rumbo liberador. (243-244) (Italics are mine.)*

As Michael Valdez Moses (18) notes, although the narrator repeatedly denies that vanity motivates his composition, he fancies himself the liberating voice who can cure modern music of its ills, a posture deluded in its self-importance. His febrile imagination seethes with visions of himself as the lone artist who will impart "authentic" music to a civilization gone astray. We should remember that, in

the first chapter, the protagonist condemns the artists and aesthetes among Mouche's acquaintances as, "siempre hirvientes de proyectos grandiosos. . . cumplían con una forma de ascetismo, renunciando a los bienes materiales, padeciendo hambre y penurias, a cambio de un problemático encuentro de sí mismos en la obra realizada" (35). This smug dismissal of their endeavors, however, is an apt description of the lofty musical project that he later conceives for himself in the composition of the *Treno* in Santa Mónica. In fact, an analysis of the narrator's shifts in attitude toward musical aesthetics and the sublime Romantic endeavor is crucial for an appreciation of his ultimately stagnant emotional make-up. What could be called the novel's musical subtext portends the protagonist's inability to achieve spiritual transformation.

### **The Musical Subtext**

In the first chapter we learn that, several years back, the narrator had discontinued work on an "ambiciosa cantata" on Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* to study organography as a weekend diversion ("sin la continuidad de propósitos exigida por la creación" [23-24]), with a particular interest in the primitive origins of music. Under the tutelage of the Curator he had developed a theory of "mimetismo-mágico-rítmico," according to which instrumental music had originated from the attempts of primitive man to imitate animal movement and bird songs (24-25). Counterpoised to this interest in primitive musical processes is the narrator's marked aversion to perhaps the most iconic composition in Western classical music, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Early in the first chapter, having taken refuge from a sudden downpour backstage at a concert hall, he happens upon an orchestra rehearsing the symphony, and reacts with alarm: "Me levanté con disgusto . . . de saber que era la Novena Sinfonía lo que presentaban los atriles, hubiera seguido de largo bajo el turbión. Si no toleraba ciertas músicas unidas al recuerdo de enfermedades de infancia, menos podía soportar el *Freunde* [sic], *Schöner Gotterfunken*, *Tochter aus Ilysium!* que había esquivado, desde entonces, como quien aparta los ojos,

durante años, de ciertos objetos evocadores de una muerte” (20-21)<sup>4</sup>. This passionate objection is both ethical and aesthetic, his repugnance stemming from a disturbing association of the Ninth Symphony with holocaustic barbarism—an association forged during his service as a military interpreter—which had intensified on his hearing the famous chorus sung by German prison guards (101-102). He further confesses a stylistic prejudice: “. . . como muchos de mi generación, aborrecía cuanto tuviera un aire ‘sublime’” (21). That the protagonist should take an interest in pre-civilized forms of music while feeling distaste for canonical Western masterpieces is not surprising given his repeated expressions of disillusion with what he views as the pretense, superficiality, and futility of modern life. What is of interest, though, is the progression of his responses to classical musical forms throughout the course of his South American journey.

At the end of the second chapter, prompted by the tedium of Los Altos, jealous suspicions about Mouche and her painter-friend, and (he insists) scruples about his obligations to the Curator, the narrator decides that he and Mouche will travel to the southern jungle to search for the primitive instruments (80). It is on this bus ride that he encounters Rosario and begins to report a sense of personal discovery: “Cuando saliéramos de la bruma opalescente que se iba verdeciendo de alba, se iniciaría, para mí, una suerte de Descubrimiento” (84). When the travelers stop for the night at a mountain inn, the narrator has the opportunity to talk with and observe Rosario, and is clearly intrigued: “No sabría decir por qué esa mujer me pareció muy bella . . .” (90). Later, ruminating alone by the hearth, the narrator is surprised to hear a radio broadcast of the Ninth Symphony. His reaction to

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4 The first line of the opening stanza of the “Ode to Joy” (“Program note”) reads: “O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!” (“Oh, friends, no more of these sounds!”). The second stanza’s first two lines read: “Freude, schöner Götterfunken, / Tochter aus Elysium” (“Joy, beautiful spark of godhood / daughter of Elysium”). The text of the novel misquotes the famous second stanza, using “Freunde” instead of “Freude.” The erroneous quote occurs both in the edition referred to here (1959 Mexico City edition, p. 20) and the 1985 Cátedra edition, p. 80. The “mistake” may result from authorial and/or editorial inadvertence, or may be the deliberate handiwork of a novelist stealthily characterizing his narrator.

the work this time contrasts sharply with his phobic response of the previous week:

Era la misma [quinta de trompas] que me hiciera huir de una sala de conciertos no hacía tantos días. Pero esta noche. . . esa remota ejecución cobraba un misterioso prestigio . . . El texto, caído al pie de estas montañas, luego de volar por sobre las cumbres, me venía de no se sabía dónde con sonoridades que no eran de notas, sino de ecos hallados en mí mismo. (91)

Unsettled by a rush of memories and associations, he muses that, “al cabo de tanto tiempo sin querer saber de su existencia, la oda musical me era devuelta con el caudal de recuerdos que en vano trataba de apartar del crescendo que ahora se iniciaba” (91-92). That the Ninth Symphony, though fraught with many of the narrator’s psychic demons, should nevertheless evoke in him unanticipated resonances and intense nostalgia, just as he has apparently begun to embrace his journey away from the world represented by the symphony and into the realm revealed to him by Rosario, suggests a subliminal conflict within the narrator that he cannot interpret. His conscious commitment to spiritual discovery is belied by memories and emotions, prompted by an unlikely catalyst, that tether him to the world he believes he is leaving behind. Just before the final chorus, the narrator feels that he is coming to his senses: “Corto la transmisión, preguntándome cómo he podido escuchar la partitura casi completa, con momentos de olvido de mí mismo, cuando las asociaciones de recuerdos no me absorbían demasiado” (103). What the narrator vaguely senses, but cannot acknowledge consciously, is that his unique heritage, his cultural patrimony, maintains an ineluctable ascendancy over him. Neither physical flight nor intellectual denial will avail him in the attempt to escape the past experiences so formative of one’s self; these factors will manifest themselves as tangential, cryptic modes of expression.

The middle section and bulk of the narrative chronicles the narrator’s increasing exhilaration at the prospect of abandoning a society that he finds abhorrent, and of being rejuvenated among a

simpler folk, as he sees it, who are ignorant of modernity's superficial preoccupations. He eventually arrives at the momentous decision to remain in the newly-founded community of Santa Mónica de los Venados:

Hoy he tomado la gran decisión de no regresar allá. . . Voy a sustraerme al destino de Sísifo que me impuso el mundo de donde vengo, huyendo de las profesiones hueras, el girar de la ardilla presa en tambor de alambre, del tiempo medido y de los oficios de tinieblas . . . Prefiero empuñar la sierra y la azada a seguir encanallando la música en menesteres de pregonero. (206)

The narrator seems, at this point, to have triumphed over the tyranny of his past. He now views with disdain not only the business of commercial music, but also what he sees as the presumptuous discourse of scholarly musicology, to which he himself has contributed:

Pienso ahora que mi vieja teoría acerca de los orígenes de la música era absurda . . . Pienso en las tonterías dichas por quienes llegaron a sostener que el hombre prehistórico halló la música en el afán de imitar la belleza del gorjeo de los pájaros—como si el trino del ave tuviese un sentido musical-estético para quien lo oye constantemente en la selva . . . interpretado por el cazador como una suerte de código sonoro, cuyo entendimiento es parte principal del oficio. (208)

However, though he believes himself free from such misconceptions and projective formulations, the protagonist nevertheless turns to his classical education to compose the *Treno*, inspired by a shamanic ritual of resurrection (190-191), in which he believes to have detected the “embrión de Sonata” (224). Convinced that he has discovered the primitive origins of music, the narrator is seized with an obsession to compose a cantata that will be unlike any before it, in that it will enact the birth of music from words (222). In an ecstatic state of mind, he pours forth musical sketches into a notebook with astonishing ease: “Una obra se ha construido en mi espíritu. . . una obra inscrita dentro de mí mismo, y que podría hacer salir sin dificultad. . .” (221). Interestingly, though, the musical structure that the protagonist envisions for the

work reflects his thoroughly classical training: a cantata introduced by the coryphaeus, joined by a melismatic, voice above the cantus firmus with various orchestral and choral entrances. As he explains, “así pensaba yo lograr una coexistencia de la escritura polifónica y la de tipo armónico, concertadas, machihembradas, según las leyes más auténticas de la música. . .” (223).

The narrator’s axiomatic reliance on classical compositional forms seems at odds with his recent rejection of “lo de allá”, as does his choice of text, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. He rationalizes this return to his once-abandoned cantata-text by asserting the appropriateness of the poem’s theme for the magical function of the Treno, and by expressing an affinity for the poem’s protagonist: “La liberación del encadenado, que asocio mentalmente a mi fuga de allá, tiene implícito un sentido de resurrección . . . muy conforme a la concepción original del treno . . .” (225). He appears unconcerned with the implicit contradiction entailed in attempting to compose a soaring magnum opus from a subsistence community hut. Neither does he find problematic the degree to which he is enacting the sublimely Romantic role of the solitary artist/genius with the Promethean task of educating and liberating mankind through his compositions<sup>5</sup>. The trajectory of the novel’s musical subtext runs precisely contrary to the narrator’s account of his spiritual journey.

What the narrator experiences in Santa Mónica as a sort of spiritual and artistic rebirth instead propels him back toward the world he thinks he has rejected. This realization impinges briefly on his consciousness when he admits that “. . . me enoja, de pronto, esa inconsciente confesión de un deseo de ‘verme ejecutado’. Mi renuncia no sería verdadera nunca, mientras pudiera sorprenderme en tales resabios” (226). He quickly puts this concern out of his mind, however, and continues his fanatical work (on Homer’s *Odyssey*, now, since he lacks a copy of Shelley) until his work is thwarted by a shortage of paper. Frustrated by the constraint imposed by a rapidly diminishing

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<sup>5</sup> See Valdez Moses on the Faustian parallels with the narrator of *Los pasos perdidos* and a reading of the novel as Carpentier’s “sobering critique of the problems and dangers inherent in a Romantic or a neo-romantic aesthetics” (14).

notebook, he tries to squeeze more staves onto each page: “. . . esa preocupación mezquina, avara, contraria a la generosidad de la inspiración, cohibe mi discurso, haciéndome pensar en pequeño lo que debo ver en grande. Me siento maniatado, menguado, ridículo. . .” (231- 232). The sulky metaphors of artistic frustration undermine his protestations of conversion on the one hand, resignation on the other. The internal conflicts that had suggested themselves obliquely in his nostalgic response to hearing the Ninth Symphony at the inn sublimate here into compulsive artistic fervor.

The narrator's fragile edifice of self-renovation is briefly shaken when he accepts a drink of liquor from the rescue pilots and experiences a sudden longing for “apetencias olvidadas”: “Hay, dentro de mí mismo, como un agitarse de otro que también soy yo, y no acaba de ajustarse a su propia estampa; él y yo nos superponemos incómodamente. . . me acobardo bajo las montañas, bajo las nubes que vuelven a espesarse, bajo los árboles que las lluvias hicieron más frondosos. Hay como telones que se cierran en torno mío” (241). He initially suppresses these fears and refuses to return. Just at the moment of refusal, though, his artistic mandate (rather conveniently) reasserts itself : “. . . en ese mismo instante suena dentro de mí, con sonoridad poderosa y festiva, el primer acorde de la orquesta del Tren. Recomienza el drama de la falta de papel para escribir. . . Pronto se me hará imperioso el desco de trabajar sobre el Prometheus Unbound – Ah, mí! Alas, pain, pain ever, for ever!” (242). This pretext justifies the protagonist's decision to leave Santa Mónica. Again, his musical impulses and priorities draw him back to civilization. Carpentier employs this subtext as a thematic counterpoint to, and implicit commentary on, the narrator's ostensible quest for self-fulfillment, during the course of which he has moved from theorizing about the primitive origins of music to writing choral pieces on the works of Homer and Shelley. In the musical subtext, which develops in retrograde motion to the narrator's conscious quest, inescapable truths, problematic identities, entire value systems assert themselves. In the aggregate, they constitute a kind of psychic interference, a background static that ghosts the narrator's inner conflict and reveals

the hollowness of his spiritual conversion. If he had experienced a true transformation in his priorities and outlook, he would not have so easily abandoned his fervent commitment to regain the way of life he cherished in South America upon learning of Rosario's new relationship (285). Interpreted in this light, one could construe the protagonist's involvement with Rosario as an elaborate (if consciously unacknowledged) pretext for divorce from Ruth. In the first chapter, the narrator had mused upon what he viewed as his two adolescences, one as a child in Latin America and one that had ended with his stagnant city life (15). I would argue that his travels constitute a sort of third adolescence, perhaps more commonly characterized as a mid-life crisis when, as here, a case of arrested development persists well into adulthood.

### **The Borgesian Challenge and the Wildean Paradox**

To limit an analysis of Carpentier's narrative voice, however, to the numerous instances of deluded self-deception on the part of the protagonist fails to account for the indisputable virtuosity with which the pseudo-memoir is elaborated. That an essentially unremarkable protagonist should produce such a bold, complex, referential, and compelling account of his experiences and aspirations, I would argue, is precisely the point, both narratively and characterologically. Contemplating the significance of the gulf between the narrator's representation of events and his interpretation of them, Stephen Gingerich (252) suggests that Carpentier has taken up the idea from a narrative strategy articulated by Borges' narrator in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius," in which the feasibility is debated of creating a first-person novel, "cuyo narrador omitiera o desfigurara los hechos e incurriera en diversas contradicciones, que permitieran a unos pocos lectores—a muy pocos lectores—la adivinación de una realidad atroz o banal" (13-14). Gingerich ponders what might be the nature of the reality obscured by the undertaking of this "intellectual challenge" (252), seeking the novel's position (which, he maintains, "exceeds the author") regarding culture(s)/Culture. I would argue that, in the case of *Los pasos perdidos*, the essential "reality" that eluded most readers

and many critics for more than twenty years (and eludes still others to this day), is not an anonymous (absence of) commentary on culture or an ironic expression or critique of existentialism, Romanticism, anthropology, primitivism, or Marxism, although the work can be rightly judged to have accomplished these thematic ends and others besides<sup>6</sup>. The novel's supreme stylistic irony is that the richly and intriguingly wrought account, one which provides a terrain of interpretive possibilities as fertile as any in literary history, can be seen to serve the primary narrative function of cloaking the insecurities of an excessively neurotic character. The dense, sweeping, and exquisitely baroque grandiosity of his delusional narrative architecture stands in direct, inverse proportion to the banality of his preoccupations.

Millington views the narrative as, at its core, a "masculinist discourse of exclusion and manipulation" (367) symptomatic of the character's search for ego identity, primarily manifested in the need to affirm "a patriarchal heterosexuality which exploits and contains women" (350). He aptly observes that, "the jungle is a cultural construct that serves as the scenario for self-dramatization" for the protagonist (349). However, I would suggest that the crisis of identity motivating and enabling the narrator's dazzling flourishes of obscurantist dilettantism is, more specifically, vocational. While Millington (363) allows that the protagonist's auto-identification as a composer reaffirms "a central Western cultural myth of identity," his analysis stops short of recognizing the centrality of a vocational identification to the sometimes dizzying artistry of the narrative. González Echevarría ("Ironía" 119) observes that the narrator refers to many of his acquaintances according to their vocation or function (e.g. Curador, Pescador, Capitán de Indias, etc.). These attributions, I would suggest, indicate what we could call the narrator's preoccupation with occupation in determining one's identity. At the uneasy core of many a modern, bourgeois man is professional anxiety. The narrator of *Los pasos perdidos* suffers from a fear of vocational inadequacy, of artistic mediocrity, a fear that perhaps parallels or recasts those anxieties

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6 In positioning *Los pasos perdidos* as "the founding archival fiction" of Latin American narrative, González Echevarría maintains that the novel.

relating to manliness and sexual potency to which Millington refers. The protagonist discounts his commercial writing as merely a sterile solution (“estéril solución”) for the imperative of survival (26), and we find scant evidence of “serious” composition in his background. Millington points out that the narrator’s meager compositional output constitutes “a rather flimsy basis on which to affirm an identity” (364). In the first chapter (23-24), the narrator informs us that he had left unfinished a cantata on Prometheus Unbound after composing only the prelude and a draft of the first scene, attributing his abandonment of the project to the emotional impact of the war. However, during the period of his renewed inspiration in Santa Mónica, he admits that, “mi pereza de entonces, mi flaqueza ante toda incitación al placer no eran, en el fondo, sino formas del miedo a crear sin estar seguro de mí mismo” (221). In a passage suggestive that his self-doubt might not have been ill-founded, he recalls having once attempted to compose a concerto under the influence of opium, only to realize that the fruits of his inspiration “eran formulas adocenadas, ideas sin consistencia, invenciones descabelladas, imposibles transferencias estéticas . . .” (221). A reader already skeptical of the narrator’s reliability is tempted to suspect that these very defects might apply to the ambitious “verbogénesis” to which he devotes himself with such ardor (222).

In the flush of creative excitement that possesses him in Santa Mónica, the narrator insists that he has overcome the reservations of earlier years and that his inspired torrent is the true product of genius unleashed, unlike the opium-induced “delirante lucubración” (221). However, there are reasons to doubt the accuracy of his assessment. For example, he composes in a type of shorthand that only he can decipher (229). He justifies this coded system as necessitated by the shortage of paper, but it could be seen as serving a double-purpose of restricting access to the transcendent composition, so that it can never be assessed on its merits, but only according to the effusive description supplied us by the narrator, a description that González Echevarría likens to Don Quijote’s absurd chivalric explanations (“Ironía” 123). As Gingerich notes, “we might easily suspect that in fact the narrator’s

composition is of little worth artistically, and in any case, unlike the verses inserted into Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, Faulkner's *Mosquitoes*, or, to slightly different effect, in Borges's "El Aleph," we could never be in a position to judge" (251). As an indication that he harbors unspoken misgivings with regard to the ease and rapidity of his output, the narrator remarks that, "sé que debo desconfiar de lo que se crea sin algún dolor . . ." (228). However, he readily dismisses these qualms and surrenders to the feverish compositional pace demanded by the intensity of his inspiration, leaving the reader, perhaps, not entirely convinced. In short, the narrator inadvertently provides several indications that he may not (or at least fears he may not) possess exceptional abilities as a composer, a suspicion bolstered by the small quantity of serious composition that he has ever attempted, with nothing, apparently, ever completed. Further calling into doubt the narrator's new-found certainty of his abilities is the episode in which, faced with the possibility that his master work may never be performed, he still promises himself that he will finish the Treno, "aunque fuera para demostrarme que no estaba vacío, totalmente vacío . . ." (232). This resolution also demonstrates the degree to which he continues to measure his personal value according to his musical abilities. The Treno, we recall, is never completed.

The narrator's spirited delineation (222-224) of his highly original-sounding, though never attested, masterpiece brings to mind Lord Henry's characterization of the "inferior poet" (59-60). According to this conception, the frustration experienced by the would-be artist who lacks the ability to transform his inspiration into creation is manifested in an exceedingly detailed, enthusiastic, and engaging description of the project. One could certainly interpret the *Pasos* narrator's wholly verbal account of his Treno as exemplifying Oscar Wilde's paradoxical formulation. In the case of Carpentier's angst-ridden protagonist, moreover, one can read the entire narrative account, the whole of the novel, as an elaborate, desperately allusive/elusive, and brilliantly (if sometimes irritatingly) wrought edifice of self-justification fueled by the narrator's fear of fraudulence as a composer. The irony that someone pretending to greatness in an art form for which he may

possess little talent should incidentally manifest an impressive ability in another area, which he apparently fails to recognize or appreciate, discernibly expresses itself in the protagonist's virtuosic narration. While Valdez Moses (18) considers the narrator an "artist manqué," I would argue that, while he is doubtless a composer manqué and an insufferable poseur in many regards, the narrator nevertheless possesses an undeniably impressive talent for writing prose.

The stubbornness with which the narrator clings to his identification with the composer's vocation is underscored in a telling series of final reflections regarding his failed "conversion." On learning from Yannes of Rosario's marriage, he aborts, with surprisingly little struggle, his plans for seeking a simple life in Latin America, instead admitting to himself what careful readers have already suspected:

El que se esfuerza por comprender demasiado, el que sufre las zozobras de una conversión, el que puede abrigar una idea de renuncia al abrazar las costumbres de quienes forjan sus destinos sobre este légame primero . . . es hombre vulnerable por cuanto ciertas potencias del mundo que ha dejado a sus espaldas siguen actuando sobre él. (285)

Not entirely satisfied, however, with this explanation for his inability to "go native" (an explanation that could be applied equally to any "civilized" man), the protagonist narrows the field of those prohibited from escaping their own time to artists in general: ". . . la única raza humana que está impedida de desligarse de las fechas es la raza de quienes hacen arte . . ." (286). Then, as if impelled by the weight of his vocational associations, he singles out "contrapuntistas", such as himself, as uniquely excluded, asserting that he could have stood with the Adelantado in the first chapter of history, "si mi oficio hubiera sido cualquier otro que el de componer música—oficio de cabo de raza—" (286). That he should invoke this excessively high-flown, though almost entirely unrealized, vision of himself to justify walking away from his hard-won acceptance into another culture and the attendant potential for leaving behind a life he claims to hate, again calls into question the significance of the journey. The travel memoir is a colossal apologia, according to which the narrator's dread of professional insignificance

is masked as a soul-bearing confessional attesting to existential struggles and personal weakness. For this category of personage, the shame of being perceived as weak and dissolute, even immoral, is far preferable to the shame of being seen as ordinary.

The protagonist's hasty and poorly justified return to his "Sisyphean" existence (285-286) further suggests that this self-portrait of a brilliant artist whose inspiration was cut short by circumstance works to reassure the narrator, as much as his readers, that he has no choice but to renounce his artistic calling. As Millington observes, this "self-affirmation in passivity. . . is a convenient alibi for failure. . ." (363). While there is nothing to prevent him, upon returning home, from reworking the *Treno* or otherwise striving to apply his recently-conceived compositional strategies, he instead sets the stage for the self-sacrificial dispossession of his rightful place among the master composers: "Falta saber ahora si no seré ensordecido y privado de voz por los martillazos del Comité que en algún lugar me aguarda" (286). Why can he not, like most artists, pursue his muse while also coping with the exigencies of earning a living? As Ian McDonald astutely noted in his analysis of existential, especially Sartrean, material in *Pasos*, "If a man's [fundamental] project is to be inferior he will wish to be a great artist in order to live inferiority" (12). The narrator characterizes himself as a man finally suspended between two worlds, "incapaz de ser otra vez el que fui" (285), but leaves us with the impression that he will, in fact, return, newly a bachelor, to his work-a-day life in the modern city. There is no concrete indication that he is a different person now from the one he was before, except that now he has license to go through life as a mediocrity. Fearing (rightly or not) that he lacks the talent to excel artistically as a composer, and chagrined by his unremarkable but quite comfortable life, the narrator conceives a vision of himself as a musical genius whose one great work has been lost to the jungle, and whose future efforts will be forever and unavoidably stifled by the mundane existence to which he is doomed. This vision, while logically suspect and belied by the evidence at every turn, is conveyed with such fierce artistry that readers risk being taken in by the narrator's delusional self-image.

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