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## ***Los pasos perdidos* revisited: The critique of Western modernity and the search for authenticity**

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*All magic, all marvel, supposes an alteration  
of order, an alterity—assumes the other, the  
world looking back at us from the other side.<sup>1</sup>*

### *Introduction*

The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980) was, along with Miguel Ángel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, Agustín Yáñez and Leopoldo Marechal, one of the great renovators of narrative fiction in the twentieth century (Rodríguez Monegal 104). To Latin American literature he contributed his theory of the “Marvellous Real” (*lo real maravilloso americano*), introduced in the prologue to the 1949 novella *The Kingdom of This World*. Through his literary works Carpentier sought an ‘authentic’ Latin American sensibility defined by the careful reflection of the history of the conquest and the intermingling of the multiple, and disparate cultural realities of the continent. This is nowhere more evident than in *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), where a

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<sup>1</sup> González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home*, 127.

critique of Western modernity and capitalism is juxtaposed against an originary and revitalising Latin American landscape.

However, as critics such as González Echevarría, Richardson, Martin and Chiampi have observed, Carpentier's Marvellous Real subscribes to a European perspective of *irreality* with which earlier Europeans and colonisers had defined the American soil. While asserting Latin America's uniqueness, the theory of the Marvellous Real still endorses a Eurocentric conception of Latin America as an exotic Other. As González Echevarría explains: "[t]o assume that the marvellous exists only in America is to adopt a spurious European perspective, since it is only from the other side that *alterity* and difference may be discovered—the same seen from within is homogenous, smooth, without edges" (González Echevarría, *The Pilgrim*, 128). Richardson has similarly pointed out that "[t]he problem with Carpentier's conception of an independent American sensibility is that it leaves intact the power relations actually in force in the world. There is contained within it a refusal to engage with the dynamic essential to the way in [which] cultures interact" (13).

The exact same critique can be levelled against *Los pasos perdidos*: through a reflexive protagonist the novel draws a comparison between the degraded and corrupted culture of the post-WWII West, and the natural and 'primitive' world of Latin America. At first glance, it would seem that Latin America is a viable alternative from which to correct the errors of history; and, as such, there is a clear intention to elevate Latin American culture to a level of universality, and consequently, to challenge its position on the periphery. However, the novel fails on this account because Carpentier does not extricate the narrative from a Euro-/Western-centric account of modernity. While the main literary tropes employed in the novel—for example, the presentation of time and linear chronologies, the description of the physical environment and the process of character archotyping—all elevate the authentic world of Latin America over the West, Carpentier's gesture is deeply embedded in Western discourse. While there is an intention to challenge Latin America's peripheral position, this is done from within a Eurocentric framework: Carpentier changes the content, but leaves intact the overall structure that defines the relationship between Latin America and the West.

Moving beyond this broad critique, however, this article demonstrates the underlying logic of Carpentier's Eurocentrism, to show how *Los pasos perdidos* reifies the myth of modernity (Quijano) and the fallacy of developmentalism (Dussel). Carpentier's construction of the Latin America/West dichotomy relies on the uncritical assimilation of loaded paradigms such as one-directional history, linear chronology and the very idea of development. These paradigms are framed within the context of Carpentier's marxist-humanist reading of the labour process and production.

#### *Character archotyping in Los pasos perdidos*

The basic narrative of *Los pasos perdidos* follows a composer-musicologist who travels to the South American jungle in search of 'primitive' musical instruments. The protagonist/narrator undertakes a journey with his French mistress, Mouche, from the modern city to an unnamed country in Latin America. Once there, they travel from the capital city to the provincial towns and eventually leave 'civilisation' and enter the jungle. Amidst the indomitable landscape, the protagonist encounters indigenous communities, retrieves the musical instruments that were the reason for the trip, and so fulfills his obligations. In the process, however, a radical transformation takes place, and rather than return to the 'civilisation' of the modern city, the protagonist chooses to stay in the jungle to begin life anew. This ultimately proves impossible, as he leaves the settlement in the jungle only to discover that he is unable to return. Through this physical journey the novel also traces the protagonist's acquisition of a new consciousness, and this transformation forms the basis for the novel's critique of modernity: through his experiences and reflections, the protagonist posits a corrupt West against an 'authentic' Latin America. What becomes evident is that *Los pasos perdidos* has a dual-intention: to carry out a Marxist critique of the labour process as a lived experience in the Western metropolis (see Palermo on alienation); and to raise Latin America to a central and universal position by showing how, by being a blank canvas, Latin America can have a restorative effect on the individual (see Souza; Subercaseaux; González Echevarría).

Throughout, the settings of the novel (with the exception of those beyond Puerto Anunciación) remain unspecified locations. Much in the

same way, the protagonist is never named. This kind of ambiguity functions, throughout the novel, to give a sense of universality to the events narrated. The initial city from which the protagonist departs for his journey, for example, is emblematic of all modern cities; the Latin American country he travels to is a composite of many places and stands for any country in Latin America. Carpentier did provide, in a post-script (and discussed in several interviews and other writings), the locations that these places were based upon. The modern city is New York; the Latin American country is Venezuela; its capital, Caracas. However, this is not explicitly stated in the novel, where each place is emblematic, embodying generalised characteristics. Similarly, the problems that face the protagonist do not result from his own idiosyncrasies, but are the problems of a generic 'modern man.' The protagonist has an acute sense of reality, and hence experiences profoundly the failure of Western culture. In the remote recesses of the jungle, he finds a way, albeit temporarily, to overcome this. The protagonist is an 'everyman', as expressed by González Echevarría: "Modern Man—in the sense of Man after the fall" (160). Carpentier's critique of Western societies is not defined as particular to Latin America, but as the result of the modern experience more generally.

Like the protagonist, the secondary characters are essentially emblematic in how they help to develop the central themes of the novel. Each of them functions according to what Wakefield has referred to as "character archotyping" (91). For example Rosario, a woman with whom the protagonist falls in love, stands as a symbol for the racially hybrid identities of Latin America. It is not coincidental that Rosario is more authentic and complete than her Western counterpart, Mouche. Rosario is defined as *mestiza*: "Era evidente que varias razas se encontraban mezcladas en esa mujer, india por el pelo y los pómulos, mediterránea por la frente y la nariz, negra por la sólida redondez de los hombros y una peculiar anchura de la cadera [...]. Lo cierto era que esa viviente suma de razas tenía raza" (108). Following the tradition of José Martí and José Vasconcelos, Carpentier evokes the image of the *mestizo* as emblem of Latin America.

Character archotyping is further evident amongst the characters that accompany the protagonist into the jungle; el Adelantado, Fray Pedro and Yannes are described as the image of prototypical explorers,

colonisers and travellers. Fray Pedro represents the early priests who indoctrinated the indigenous population into the Catholic faith; Yannes is the explorer lured by the idea of finding riches—diamonds, gold and silver—in the image of those who sought after El Dorado; el Adelantado is *el descubridor*, who founds a new settlement in the depths of the jungle. More than any other character, el Adelantado mirrors the image of the colonisers who imposed an alien order on Latin American reality. This becomes evident in the civic structure that gives order to the newly founded town, Santa Mónica de los Venados. As the narrator comments:

El Adelantado me dice, con un temblor de orgullo en la voz: “Esta es la Plaza Mayor... Allí vive mi hijo Marcos... Allí, mis tres hijas... En la nave tenemos granos y enseres, y algunas bestias... Detrás, el barrio de los indios...” Y añade, volviéndose hacia Fray Pedro: “Frente a la Casa de Gobierno levantaremos la Catedral”. (254)

The narrator delineates each of these secondary characters within a schematic vision of conquest and colonialism. The trip that they undertake through the jungle to Santa Mónica de los Venados itself becomes symbolic of the history of the American continent. Through the narrator, the characters (including himself) are conceived as conquistadors:

Somos Conquistadores que vamos en busca del Reino de Manoa. Fray Pedro es nuestro capellán, al que pediremos confesión si quedamos malheridos en la entrada. El Adelantado bien puede ser Felipe de Urre. El griego es Micer Codro, el astrólogo. Gavilán pasa a ser Leoncico, el perro de Balboa. Y yo me otorgo, en la empresa, los cargos del trompeta Juan de San Pedro, con mujer tomada a bragas en el saqueo de un pueblo. Los indios son indios, y aunque parezca extraño, me he habituado a la rara distinción de condiciones hecha por el Adelantado, sin poner en ello, por cierto, la menor malicia, cuando, al narrar algunas de sus andanzas, dice muy naturalmente: “Éramos tres *hombres* y doce *indios*”. Me imagino que una cuestión de bautizo rige ese reparo, y esto da visos de la novela que, por la autenticidad del decorado, estoy fraguando. (213)

This passage is characteristic of how the narrator’s reflexive point of view frames the novel’s principal themes. As the narrative moves forward, passages such as this link, via the first person narration, the protagonist’s lived experience to a master narrative of the history of Latin America.

The central concern of *Los pasos perdidos*—the confrontation between Europe and the ‘authentic’ culture of Latin America—is clear in the trajectory of the narrative: the trip from the modern West to Santa Mónica is an odyssey in which the jungle and nature dominate completely. This constitutes a rite of passage for the protagonist and is an integral part of his transformation. The narrative unfolds within a virginal environment, where, immersed in his surroundings, he rejoices in a new way for life and renounces—almost entirely—the modern, Western life he has left behind. As Souza comments: “[i]t would seem that the protagonist has returned to paradise [and] is rejuvenated in this world of elemental forms” (42).

In its broadest sense, then, the novel is about a return to origins. In the first instance, a return to the protagonist’s origins as he comes into contact with the Latin American culture of his childhood. More importantly, however, the narrative traces a return to the origins of man, to the birth of music, the founding of cities, the inception of civilisation and to the beginnings of humanity itself. As the protagonist puts it:

Nos vemos como intrusos, prestos a ser arrojados de un dominio vedado. Lo que se abre ante nuestros ojos es el mundo anterior al hombre. [...] Estamos en el mundo del Génesis, al fin del Cuarto Día de la Creación. Si retrocediéramos un poco más, llegaríamos adonde comenzara la terrible soledad del Creador—la tristeza sideral de los tiempos sin incienso y sin alabanzas, cuando la tierra era desordenada y vacía, y las tinieblas estaban sobre la haz del abismo. (251)

The novel presents Latin America as a place where man (and woman) can reshape, distort or escape history; where man can return to some foundational origin before the corrupting course of Western-style ‘civilisation.’ As Subercaseaux has pointed out, the most pertinent aspect of Carpentier’s vision of Latin America is that of “[el] mundo Americano, concebido como el mundo en génesis, como la infancia de la humanidad, como el único lugar en que el hombre puede retomar el hilo de la historia, defenderse de las deformaciones, repensar su destino y reedificar una vida auténtica, libre de toda enajenación” (Subercaseaux 332). It is only from a perspective of this virgin world that Carpentier can carry out his critique of the West.

The novel accounts for differences between Latin America and the West in the protagonist’s incessant reference to the world *de allá*

(generally used as an indication of the West being *there* and not *here*). In Carpentier's conception, the *here* of Latin American reality is distinctly different from Western modernity: Latin America is constructed through the differential attributes of "our" continent. To achieve this, the novel is structured according to a series of contrasting forces that emerge from the colonial situation. Palermo identifies these as: "[el] contraste entre civilización y vida primitiva; contraste entre Yo y Otro; contraste entre Mundo de Acá y el Mundo de Allá; contraste entre creación estética original, surgida de la vivencia espontánea del momento primigenio, y creación racionalizada, fruto de la consciente asimilación de las formas de cultura occidentales" (Palermo 93). Each component of the novel examines this well-worn binary of Latin America and the West. As I will argue, the protagonist understands and experiences reality within this structure; his reflections on, and experiences of, the natural environment; his relationship to his lover Mouche and then to the *mestizo* Rosario; and even the implications of his own artistic production, are inscribed by the differences between Latin America and the West, belonging either to the world *de allá* (the *over there* of the West), or alternatively, to the world *de acá* (the *here* of Latin America).<sup>2</sup> This is why *Los pasos perdidos* has been characterised as the "most programmatic" of all of Carpentier's novels (Martin 191).

A useful framework for analysing this aspect of Carpentier's work is provided by Subercaseaux's analysis of the development of *enajenación* (alienation) and *desenajenación* (dis-alienation) in *The Kingdom of This World*, represented through two distinctive realities: a reality to be rejected and a new reality to stand in its place. This approach can be productively employed to understand *Los pasos perdidos*: the initial city, representing modern society and Western civilisation on the whole, is characterised by *alienation*, and is rejected by the protagonist. As Latin American reality is unveiled it offers up authenticity, a remedy to overcome the protagonist's alienation. Subercaseaux discusses this formulation with reference to the imposition of foreign values onto Latin American reality, stating that "[l]a enajenación proviene de la imposición de valores y categorías foráneas a una realidad americana, valores que no pueden ser aceptados sin

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<sup>2</sup> For specific instances of the use of this binary structure throughout the novel see pages: 130, 166, 279, 302, 311-312, 316, 354.

enajenarse y dejar de ser lo que se es para ser otra cosa” (325). In other words, it refers back to the wider historical context of conquest and colonialism.

*A Humanist Marxist critique of the West*

In *Los pasos perdidos*, however, the rejection of reality not only constitutes an implicit critique of the imposition of foreign values onto Latin America since the conquest, but is also an explicit discussion of the alienation inherent in modern Western culture. In the early sections of the novel, Carpentier portrays a modern city characterised entirely by hostility. The initial chapters show a man estranged from his environment, living a life dictated by monotony and obligation:

Había grandes lagunas de semanas y semanas en la crónica de mi propio existir; temporadas que no me dejaban un recuerdo válido, la huella de una sensación excepcional, una emoción duradera; días en que todo gesto producía la obsesionante impresión de haberlo hecho antes en circunstancias idénticas—de haberme sentado en el mismo rincón, de haber contado la misma historia. (12-13)

The geography of that modern Western city is a landscape that distances Western man from himself, prohibiting him from responding to his essential impulses and desires: man lives without a clear purpose, oppressed by the urban environment where he dwells. In sharp contrast, juxtaposing the world of the jungle to the *over there* (*el mundo de allá*) of the West, the protagonist offers the following description of the jungle:

Una vez más me asombro ante la gravedad de los problemas planteados en estas comarcas, tan desconocidas como las blancas *Terras Incógnitas* de los antiguos cartógrafos, en donde los hombres de *allá* sólo ven saurios, vampiros, serpientes de mordida fulminante y danzas de indios. [...] [H]e encontrado en todas partes la solicitación inteligente, el motivo de meditación, formas de arte, de poesía, mitos, más instructivos para comprender al hombre que cientos de libros escritos en las bibliotecas por hombres jactanciosos de conocer al Hombre. (279)

These descriptions characterise the two realities that the novel presents. The alienated reality is framed in relation to Western discourse, and is defined by the forces that rationalise being and creativity. In stark contrast, the Latin American jungle is a means to an authentic mode of being, to love, to an unmediated creative process, and ultimately, to *self*.

*Los pasos perdidos* moves beyond the representation of alienation as a regional experience to addresses alienation in broader terms. The initial sections of the novel, set in a modern society based on New York, shift the examination of alienation to a ‘universal’ application. In a move consistent with humanist marxism, alienation is not simply an existential consequence of the conquest of Latin America, but a product of Western modernity itself, which results from capitalist relations of production. The initial sections of the novel examine alienation as it pertains to the protagonist as labourer, discussed in the explicit terms of the commodity form.

The novel develops a concept of alienation along two primary lines: it examines the relation of the protagonist to his labour and the social relations of production that develop from this; and it examines the estrangement from others and from himself that result from this experience. Alienation develops from an economic materialist basis; it forms social relations, and has real philosophical and psychological consequences. According to Marx’s basic conception:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the material of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. (283)

In the labour process man subjects the natural world to his sovereign power and so realises and changes his nature. Labour affirms man as a creative being, “wherein the satisfaction of needs develops the powers and potential of human beings” (Marshall 10). Under capitalist production the labour process changes: man’s *own labour* is a commodity, and thus, man is no longer involved in producing his consciousness. This is most explicit in passages where the narrator considers his employment as a composer for the musical scores of advertisements:

Una verdad envenenaba mi satisfacción primera: y era que todo aquel encarnizado trabajo, los alardes de buen gusto, de dominio de oficio, la elección y coordinación de mis colaboradores y asistentes, había parido, en fin de cuentas, una película publicitaria, encargada a la empresa que me empleaba por un Consorcio Pesquero, trabado en lucha feroz con una red de

cooperativas. Un equipo de técnicos y artistas se habían extenuado durante semanas y semanas en salas oscuras para lograr esa obra del celuloide cuyo único propósito era atraer la atención de cierto público de Atlas Alacenas sobre los recursos de una actividad industrial capaz de promover, día tras día, la multiplicación de los peces. (36-7)

Such passages highlight the relationship of the protagonist to the commodity form and to the bourgeois class that commissions it. The composer's gruelling efforts, the pretensions to good taste and the requirements of technical skill are measured exclusively in economic terms by their effect on the daily consumption of fish. The creative work is relegated to the mechanics of capitalist commodity production and subjugated to labour. Within capitalist society, the role of art is considered a commodity. As Eagleton notes, the work of art

may be an artefact, a product of social consciousness, a world vision; but it is also an *industry*. Books are not just structures of meaning, they are also commodities produced by publishers and sold on the market at a profit. Drama is not just a collection of literary texts; it is a capitalist business which employs certain men (authors, directors, actors, stage-hands) to produce a commodity to be consumed by an audience at a profit. (Eagleton 55)

The protagonist's artistic production in the early parts of the novel is characterised quite deliberately as "a social activity, a form of social and economic production which exists alongside, and interrelates with, other such forms" (Eagleton 56). This process, *art as labour*, is subsequently contrasted in the novel with the protagonist's creation of el 'Treno' (the 'Threnody'), a musical piece that—as will be discussed below—is the result of the artist's meditations, and is based on a different conception of art.

As a direct result of his alienation in the labour process, the protagonist becomes a prisoner of his existence, wherein acts as simple as not being able to find a place to drink evoke a profound feeling of uselessness:

Ahora me veo en la calle nuevamente, en busca de un bar. Si tuviera que andar mucho para alcanzar una copa de licor, me vería invadido muy pronto por el estado de depresión que he conocido algunas veces, y me hace sentirme como preso en un ámbito sin salida, exasperado de no poder cambiar nada en mi existencia, regida siempre por voluntades ajenas, que apenas si me dejan la libertad de elegir la carne o el cereal que prefiero para mi desayuno. (21-22)

In the Western metropolis, the protagonist experiences his entire material condition as a burden, as instances of isolation, monotony and depression. This brings about a fragmentation of his subjectivity as he recognises two distinct individuals in himself: one is the person who is trapped by his social commitments, his work and relationships; the other, more reflective and aware of these processes, is able to comment on his condition. While this duality manifests itself throughout the novel, it is most prominent in the early sections, where the unification of the protagonist's two selves is impossible; alienation is the result of the metropolis and the capitalist mode of production by which he is subsumed. It is not until the protagonist leaves the city, cuts all ties to his life back *there*, enters the jungle and has been absorbed into its alternate life that he feels (albeit temporarily) a sense of these two halves being unified. The city is a place where individuals lose knowledge of themselves and all contact with their own humanity. It is a grey and mechanical landscape: “la dureza, [...] de aquella ciudad del perenne anonimato dentro de la multitud, de la eterna prisa, donde los ojos sólo se encontraban por casualidad, y la sonrisa, cuando era de un desconocido, siempre ocultaba una proposición” (40). The narrator's denomination of this Western metropolis as *allá* serves to detach and depersonalise the relation between this urban setting and him.

A similar condition of alienation and dissatisfaction is repeated in the personal relationships the protagonist maintains with his wife Ruth, and his lover Mouche. His marriage is characterised as being mechanical, exemplified by the couple's “weekly embrace”:

El domingo, al fin de la mañana, yo solía pasar un momento en su lecho, cumpliendo con lo que consideraba un deber de esposo, aunque sin acertar a saber si, en realidad, mi acto respondía a un verdadero deseo por parte de Ruth. Era probable que ella, a su vez, se creyera obligada a brindarse a esa hebdomadaria práctica física en virtud de una obligación contraída en el instante de estampar su firma al pie de nuestro contrato matrimonial. (8-9)

The relationship is explained in terms of the couple's work commitments. The narrator notes that “las horas de la actriz no son las horas del empleado” (8), and identifies Ruth's work as the primary cause for their failing marriage: he feels “una fogarada de ira contra el estúpido oficio de fingimiento que siempre se interponía entre nuestras personas” (10). When Ruth takes a trip to the other side of the country,

the protagonist wanders the streets searching for something to do, reflecting on the limitations of their relationship:

El recuerdo de su viaje me produjo una repentina irritación: era ella, realmente, a la que yo estaba persiguiendo ahora; la única persona que deseaba tener a mi lado, en esta tarde sofocante y aneblada, cuyo cielo se ensombrecía tras de la monótona agitación de los primeros anuncios luminosos. Pero otra vez un texto, un escenario, una distancia, se interponía entre nuestros cuerpos. (18)

Similarly, the protagonist's relationship with his lover Mouche is portrayed as a relationship borne of convenience and characterised by a distinct lack of 'love': "aunque mis noches se iniciaran o terminaran en su lecho, entre nosotros se decían muy pocas palabras de cariño" (34). The protagonist's critique of Mouche is also a critique of Western intellectuals who attempt to overcome alienation through art, philosophy and beliefs in other "veiled mediums." As an astrologer, Mouche represents branches of dubious Western knowledge that extend beyond rationalism and production, and is criticised by for being "el arquetipo de la burguesa" (167). Included in this is a critique of Surrealist practices, particularly of the 'manufacturing' of the marvellous. If Rosario is the prototype for Latin American *mestizo* culture, then Mouche represents European discourse, intellectualism and, in particular, the manufacture of meaning by people who, as they are described in the novel, are drawn to the bottle as a means to defend themselves against "el desaliento, las congojas del fracaso, el descontento de sí mismos, el miedo al rechazo" (40). As the protagonist recounts, at Mouche's vaguely intellectual meetings, attendees cleave hopelessly to meaning. Conversations range "[del] *da-sein* al boxeo, del marxismo al empeño de Hugo [...] da la Kábala a la Angustia, [...] del teatro isabelino a la gnosis, del platonismo a la acupuntura" (40). The explicit critique enacted in the novel is that these disenfranchised intellectuals adopt disparate attitudes and interests which range from "místicas orientales, el pitagorismo, los tantras tibetanos" (39), entirely superficially. This is further exemplified as the protagonist and Mouche first arrive in the Latin American capital city, where they visit a junk store and Mouche buys a seahorse because it reminds her of "Rimbaud's black *hippocampe*." The protagonist proceeds to explain that such a seahorse can be found anywhere, and in his critique is a veiled commentary on the appropriation and repetition of 'inauthentic' ideas.

He states that it would be more meaningful to buy an authentic artefact such as “un rosario filigranado, de hechura colonial, que estaba en una vitrina” (55). From their arrival in Latin America, it is clear that Mouche’s sensibilities belong to the West and that they cannot be reconciled with what she finds in Latin America. As the protagonist states: “Me sentí irritado, súbitamente, por una suficiencia muy habitual de mi amiga, que la ponía en posición de hostilidad apenas se veía en contacto con algo que ignorara los santos y señas de ciertos ambientes artísticos frecuentados por ella en Europa” (59).

Ruth and Mouche constitute the two attitudes of the Western subject: alienation and intellectualism, respectively (Palermo 108). It is clear that both perspectives are attached to questions of authenticity. The protagonist’s relationship to each woman is characterised by emptiness and the lack of any meaningful connection; each relationship is conducted mechanically against the background of a threatening city where the protagonist is overwhelmed by his isolation. This becomes more apparent as he falls in love with Rosario, as this third relationship contains all of the elements that the relationships to Ruth and Mouche lack. As the protagonist describes it: “[v]ivimos el júbilo impar de la sed compartida y saciada, y cuando nos asomamos a lo que nos rodea, creemos recordar un país de sabores nuevos” (211). Again, the novel’s critique of the West and its positing of Latin America as a viable alternative are made explicit through the protagonist’s search for ways of life that man had lost forever—“por ciertos modos de vivir que el hombre había perdido para siempre” (48). In Latin America he overcomes his alienation by extricating himself from the modern modes of production and coming into contact with the natural world. Quite literally, *Los pasos perdidos* enacts the humanist conception of a productive and positive labour as it occurs between man and nature.

### *The natural landscape*

The same distinctions regarding the two realities of the novel’s *allá and acá*, can be identified in Carpentier’s treatment of the natural landscape, wherein the ‘authenticity’ of Latin America is again apparent. The jungle, the mountains, the sky, the geological formations, the vegetation and fauna are present to the narrator in overwhelming density: he describes gigantic trees, the enormous plummet of cliffs, and

dizzying terraces (230-231). The natural forms come to dominate the narrative in this manner and, as they amass, they provide a testimony of fabulous moments (230).

At a loss to describe these scenes, the protagonist is forced to approximate them. He does this by comparing the natural phenomena with Western art and architecture, invoking “a las Babeles imaginarias de los pintores de lo fantástico, de los más alucinados ilustradores de tentaciones de santos” (230). Only via such comparisons, “al mundo de Bosco,” as he calls it, can he even begin to convey the landscape. Such as in this comparison: “[e]sto que miraba era algo como una titánica ciudad—ciudad de edificaciones múltiples y espaciadas—, con escaleras ciclópeas, mausoleos metidos en las nubes, explanadas inmensas dominadas por extrañas fortalezas de obsidiana” (231). However, it is clear that these comparisons cannot fully account for the magnitude of the landscape. As he admits, even when he can ascertain a similarity to known forms, he is forced to immediately discount them due to the proportions (231). Even the Gothic cathedral—the most impressive Western form he can conjure up—falls short:

Y allá, sobre aquel fondo de cirros, se afirmaba la Capital de las Formas: una increíble catedral gótica, de una milla de alto, con sus dos torres, su nave, su ábside y sus arbotantes, montada sobre un peñón cónico hecho de una materia extraña, con sombrías irisaciones de hulla. Los campanarios eran barridos por nieblas espesas que se atorbellinaban al ser rotas por los filos de granito. (231)

The jungle is a Capital of Forms. The critique of the West implicit in these lines is simple: what is most marvellous in the West is its art, either imagined or constructed; but in Latin America, the marvellous is present in a natural form that exceeds Western constructions. To the Western mind that contemplates it, the Latin American natural world appears as “algo tan fuera de lo real—morada de dioses, tronos y graderíos destinados a la celebración de algún Juicio Final—, que el ánimo, pasmado, no buscaba la menor interpretación de aquella desconocida arquitectura telúrica, aceptando sin razonar su belleza vertical e inexorable” (231). As before, it is a question of authenticity as Latin America is exalted against the degraded culture of the West. Latin America forms a viable and, in many ways, corrective alternative to Western culture.

The novel, then, attributes distinct values to Western artists and intellectuals' traditions, and the authenticity of the people of Latin America. "Una de las líneas primordiales de la novela consiste en el choque de la psiquis refinada y enfermiza de un intelectual occidental de mediados del siglo XX con la sana conciencia natural de los habitantes de las latitudes vírgenes del Nuevo Continente" (Kuteischikova 336). Within this paradigm, the figure of the narrator stands for the Western intellectual and its corresponding artistic traditions; he is a product of the modern culture from which he emerged, a 'civilised man.' In contrast, the 'natives' that he encounters are subjects in harmony and synchronicity with their natural environment, living "una vida sometida a los ritmos primordiales" (232). This difference is enhanced because the narrator is an artist who draws on his knowledge of Western cultural artefacts to narrate his experiences. And more importantly, his own artistic production is indebted to Western forms: *el Treno*, the work he begins composing in the jungle, is itself a musical adaptation of Shelley's *Prometheus Bound*.

*El Treno: The 'Threnody'*

As discussed, the novel presents two contrasting modes of existence, of alienation and dis-alienation/'authenticity.' The early sections of novel are narrated through the first mode: the narrator gave up his research on music and ceased composing to sell his labour to an advertising company. Thus, his art is relegated to the levels of the commodity and subsistence. However, as a result of his experience in the jungle, once the external pressures of Western society have been eliminated, the protagonist begins to compose freely and passionately. The act of creation which leads him to compose *el Treno* (the Thredony) is equated to the escape from *there* and to his resurrection in the jungle: "[l]a liberación del encadenado, que asocio mentalmente a mi fuga *de allá*, tiene implícito un sentido de resurrección, de regreso de entre las sombras, muy conforme a la concepción original del treno, que era canto mágico destinado a hacer volver el muerto a la vida" (290-291). By this time, the creative process is no longer impinged upon by the social relations of production, commercialism, exchange and profit. Music becomes, quite distinctly, the realised form of desire. The work of

art appears to him as a thing that is first felt, and that must then be given a concrete form. The narrator explains:

[M]e despierto con dificultad, con una rara sensación de que, en mi mente, acaba de realizarse un gran trabajo: algo como una maduración y compactación de elementos informes, disgregados, sin sentido al estar dispersos, y que, de pronto, al ordenarse, cobran un significado preciso. Una obra se ha construido en mi espíritu; es “cosa” para mis ojos abiertos o cerrados, suena en mis oídos, asombrándome por la lógica de su ordenación. Una obra inscrita dentro de mí mismo, y que podría hacer salir sin dificultad, haciéndola texto, partitura, algo que todos palparan, leyeran, entendieran. (284-285)

The creative process that impels the protagonist to write el ‘Treno’ is an intoxication, ‘[una] delirante lucubración’ (285), and this acute transformation constitutes a reawakening.

For the protagonist, the act of composing el ‘Treno’ constitutes an authentic experience, yet its creation in a remote clearing in the jungle brings to bear a significant contradiction: whilst he decides to stay in the jungle, and is able to compose there, his work belongs to the Western civilisation that he has escaped. The forms of art that he creates do not belong to the ‘primitive’ remoteness of the jungle, but to modern Western society. Though the artist has extricated himself from that context, his work is still a product of it. Even in pragmatic terms, it is meaningless without the West:

[d]e nada sirve la partitura que no ha de ser ejecutada. La obra de arte se destina a los demás, y muy especialmente la música, que tiene los medios de alcanzar las más vastas audiencias. He esperado el momento en que se consuma mi evasión de los lugares en donde podría ser escuchada una obra mía, para empezar a componer realmente. Es absurdo, insensato, risible. (300)

When planes reach Santa Mónica de los Venados to rescue him, the possibility of completing el ‘Treno’ is what spurs the protagonist’s return to the capital: the role of the artist is to make art; the lack of materials in the jungle would be akin to being silenced. In other words, “no puedo carecer de papel y tinta: de cosas expresadas o por expresar con los medios del papel y la tinta” (315). The artist cannot escape, even in these most basic of ways, the dependence of his art upon the context the West provides, and from which it stems. Nor can the protagonist ignore his art, because it is only by responding to this innate desire that he is fulfilled. It is a complex series of contradictions. “Iré a comprar las

pocas cosas que me son necesarias para llevar,” he states, “aquí, una vida tan plena como la conocen los demás. Todos ellos, con sus manos, con su vocación, cumplen un destino. Caza el cazador, adoctrina el fraile, gobierna el Adelantado” (316). To compose, and to be thereby fulfilled, requires leaving the jungle behind and returning to the capital. These contradictions are made ever more acute by the fact that later, when he wishes to return to the jungle, he cannot—returning proves impossible because rising water has concealed the secret passageway to Santa Mónica de los Venados from view. The artist cannot escape his context—neither physically nor as a mode of existence—which is necessarily apart from the natural and authentic life presented by the jungle. Martin argues that this is the final meaning inscribed in *Los pasos perdidos*: “there is no turning back—artists and intellectuals are, after all and above all, the antennae of the race” (194). The protagonist’s ‘Threnody’ belongs to the historical present of the West, and not to the *a*-historical reality of the jungle. The protagonist understands his role as a Western artist as follows:

[L]a única raza humana que está impedida de desligarse de las fechas es la raza de quienes hacen arte, y no sólo tienen que adelantarse a un ayer inmediato, representado en testimonios tangibles, sino que se anticipan al canto y forma de otros que vendrán después, creando nuevos testimonios tangibles en plena conciencia de lo hecho hasta hoy. (370)

To live in Latin America, in “El Valle del Tiempo Detenido,” would mean living outside of history and outside of the present. The only conclusion to draw is that the artist and intellectual must necessarily engage history, engage his/her historical present, and bear witness to his/her time. Towards the end of the novel the narrator concludes as much: “yo hubiera podido permanecer [en Santa Mónica] si mi oficio hubiera sido cualquier otro que el de componer música—oficio de cabo de raza” (370). Deeply embedded in the dichotomy of the West and Latin America is the commentary that art is the product of its time, and, consequently, must bear the weight of history.

The trajectory of Carpentier’s commentary on art making is as follows: in the beginning of the novel, under capitalism, art making is production, including the social relations between its producer and consumer and its vendor and purchaser. Later, in the Latin American jungle, art making appears divorced from commerce, and is able to

“evoke and realize all the power of man’s soul, to stir him into a sense of his creative plenitude” (Eagleton 67). This is the work of el ‘Treno.’ By the end of the novel, though, the narrator concludes that his art is historically bound to the Western context where his technique belongs as received historical forms. Or, in Eagleton’s words, where “the ideology which underpins those property-relations [of art making] embodies itself in a certain form” (Eagleton 70).

### *The Myth of Modernity*

In *Los pasos perdidos* history is understood in a much more expansive way than simply in relation to the history of the conquest or of the colonial experience in Latin America. The novel presents history in relation to the development of Western ‘civilisation,’ and relies on this as the foundation from which to make the already outlined criticisms of the West. Taking this as the starting point, Carpentier enacts foundational myths about Western development, which entrenches his novel squarely in the very Western, capitalist hegemony that he tries to critique. The protagonist recounts travelling through different historical periods, until reaching, somewhere deep in the jungle, the origins of man: “Hemos salido del paleolítico [...] para entrar en un ámbito que hacía retroceder los confines de la vida humana a lo más tenebroso de la noche de las edades” (244). As they travel through the physical landscapes, the protagonist and his party concurrently move through different historical epochs: the historical moments are related to the geographical places that they encounter. This relies on a developmentalist view based on a linear chronology that moves, crudely, from ‘primitive’ nature to ‘civilisation.’ The contrast between historical periods is made by comparing the *historical-present* of the West and the *a-historicity* of the Latin American jungle. The physical geographical journey enacts a return to the origins of man, wherein, “vislumbro ahora la estupefaciente posibilidad de viajar en el tiempo, como otros viajan en el espacio” (240).

In her analysis of temporality in the novel, Palermo distinguishes between time in retrocession and time in progression (96-97). Both processes are achieved by the geographical movement of the protagonist from the city to the jungle and on his return trip, from the jungle back to the city. In retrocession, this leads from modernity to

human origins. The movement begins in the historical present of the mid-twentieth century, and retrogresses through the colonial era, the discovery and conquest of the Americas, the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, until arriving at the inception of human culture, at the World of Genesis (251). Entering the jungle the narrator comments: “[e]n fuga desaforada, los años de vaciaban, destranscurrían, se borraban, rellorando calendarios, devolviendo lunas, pasando de los siglos de tres cifras al siglo de los números” (240).

The process of retrocession is used to undo major historical events; as the narrator further witnesses, “Perdió el Graal su relumbre, cayeron los clavos de la cruz, los mercaderes volvieron al templo, borrosé la estrella de la natividad, y fue el Año Cero, en que regresó al cielo el Ángel de la Anunciación” (240). The jungle is thus constructed against the expansive history of Western civilisation. Retrocession only ends with an encounter with the most primal forms of life in a landscape that is remote and original. Here, before Western history has taken its course, amid ‘human larvae’ that the protagonist is reluctant to acknowledge as beings, he marvels at the birth of culture: “en la gran selva que se llena de espantos nocturnos, surge la Palabra. Una palabra que es ya más que palabra. [...] Es algo situado mucho más allá del lenguaje, y que, sin embargo, está muy lejos aún del canto. Algo que ignora la vocalización” (247-248). This primordial experience of man in the deep recesses of the jungle is more marvellous than the entire history of civilisation that has been undone by the journey through it.

It is compelling to note that the analysis of history that the novel effects can only be carried out by a man from *allá*, entrenched in Western discourse, who possesses a knowledge emanating from beyond the confines of the jungle. Through his particular experience of time, what Palermo refers to as the protagonist’s “internal time” (96), history can be erased, and man can return to the ‘Paleolithic’:

Y tornaron a crecer las fechas del otro lado del Año Cero—fechas de dos, de tres, de cinco cifras—, hasta que alcanzamos el tiempo en que el hombre, cansado de errar sobre la tierra, inventó la agricultura al fijar sus primeras aldeas en las orillas de los ríos, y, necesitado de mayor música pasó del bastón de ritmo al tambor que era un cilindro de madera ornamentada al fuego, inventó el órgano al soplar en una caña hueca, y lloró a sus muertos haciendo bramar un ánfora de barro. Estamos en la Era Paleolítica. (240)

This return constitutes a degree-zero from which history (and, simultaneously, the narrative) begin anew. As González Echevarría shows: “*Los Pasos Perdidos* brings us back [...] looking for an empty present wherein to make a first inscription” (*Myth* 4). Once again, in contrast to the *historical-present* of the West, then, the novel posits the *a-historicity* of Latin America. While Latin America is related to the origins of man and culture, the West bears the burden of history. This is a clear schism throughout the narrative. For example, the death camps of the Holocaust and WWII mark the fall of European culture:

Lo nuevo aquí, lo inédito, lo moderno, era aquel antro del horror, aquella cancillería del horror, aquel coto vedado del horror que nos tocara conocer en nuestro avance: la Mansión del Calofrío, donde todo era testimonio de torturas, exterminio en masa, cremaciones, entre murallas salpicadas de sangre y excrementos, montones de huesos, dentaduras humanas arrinconadas a paletadas, sin hablar de las muertes peores, logradas en frío, por manos enguantadas de caucho, en la blancura aséptica, neta luminosa, de las cámaras de operaciones. A dos pasos de aquí, una humanidad sensible y cultivada –sin hacer caso del humo de ciertas chimeneas, por las que habían brotado un poco antes, plegarias aulladas en yiddish– seguía coleccionando sellos, estudiando las glorias de la raza, tocando pequeñas músicas nocturnas de Mozart, leyendo *La Sirenita* de Andersen a los niños. (125)

The Holocaust is a direct product of the so-called progress of European culture: the culmination of Western civilisation in the most cold-blooded barbarism of history, “la quiebra absoluta del hombre de Occidente” (126). The West is bound to the historical present, and is thus the product of the past and bound to its atrocities; Latin America, by contrast, provides a means of escape from the historical present through a present free from the burden of history. In the jungle, time is constituted anew because it is the point of origin where it is possible to live “en el presente, sin poseer nada, sin arrastrar el ayer, sin pensar en el mañana” (23: 243). Latin America constitutes an antidote to Western time: a place and a time from which to begin anew and to live outside the conditions of modernity.

The capacity of Western modernity to become a hegemonic force relies on the belief that development departs from a state of nature and primitiveness, until reaching, following the European model, its highest point of civilisation. The idea of a one-directional, linear, chronology

that structures the movement of evolution and development is central to the Eurocentric version of history. As Quijano explains

the foundational myth of the Eurocentric version of modernity is the idea of the state of nature as the point of departure for the civilised course of history whose culmination is European or Western civilisation; from this myth originated the specifically Eurocentric evolutionist perspective of linear and unidirectional movement and changes in human history. (551)

Similarly, as Dussel contends, the fallacy of developmentalism consists “in thinking that the path of Europe’s modern development must be followed unilaterally by every other culture” (Dussel 68). A principal characteristic of Eurocentrism is the narration of modernity as a purely European phenomenon, whose culmination is European civilisation. The myth of modernity is based on the assumption that, as Europe came into contact with other, ‘inferior’ cultures and races, rationality and modernity became exclusively European products and experiences (Quijano 542). This resulted in the designation of other cultures as lacking the same capacity for rational thought, and being defined as primitive. This process was structured through the dual/binary logic of dialectic thought, integral to Western epistemology. To reinforce the concept of European superiority, the relationship between non-Europe and Europe was codified in a strong play of categories: “East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern-Europe and not Europe” (Quijano 542). An entire system that reinforces European superiority has developed historically from this binary.

### *Conclusion*

Via the protagonist’s reflections, the representation of time in *Los pasos perdidos* moves ‘in-retrocession’ from the modern city (emblem of civilisation and progress) until it reaches the year zero and the beginning of time (a world characterised as natural and ‘primitive’). This reading of the novel is well established (see Palermo, Souza, González Echevarría). Carpentier posits that the virginal landscapes of Latin America are akin to an Eden, or paradise, that can bring about the restoration and ameliorate the conditions of alienation experienced by the modern subject. On a simple level it is easy to read the novel as a site of postcolonial resistance and critique. The problem, however, is

that although Carpentier's representation aims to evaluate Latin America positively, the narrative relies on the ideological assumption that the West embodies Modernity and the end result of history and progress, whilst Latin America occupies a *pre* or *a*-historical plane. The contrast between the Western metropolis and the Latin American jungle, the representation of alienation and of dis-alienation, and the trope of the physical landscape are all premised on developmentalism.

In *Los pasos perdidos*, the myth of modernity plays out because of the underlying logic of developmentalism, which lies at the heart of its failure to fully extricate itself from a Eurocentric vision of the world. Although there is a revolutionary impulse, it remains contained within the binary, dualistic structure of Eurocentric epistemology, and only constitutes a limited critical account. Carpentier reifies the myth of modernity: in contrast to Europe, Latin America is an *a*-historical, blank canvas; and even though the West may be corrupted, it is still the historical culmination of civilisation and development. Despite what may initially seem a radical re-reading of modernity, Carpentier uncritically reproduces the fundamental myth of modernity and along with it, the entirety of Western discourse which posits a binary of Europe and Latin America.

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