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Paris and 'el país': The Process of Representation in El recurso del método

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In the opening scene of *El recurso del método*, the Prime Minister awakens in his Paris home and, like the young Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, recalls the beds in which he has awakened in the past—the child's experience here is transformed into an inventory of the rooms of the dictator's favorite brothel. On arising, he surveys his collection of paintings and sculpture and then, a few pages later, engages in a lengthy discussion of French writers and composers (including Proust's Vinteuil) with the Illustrious Academic, who has dropped by in hopes that he can flog the manuscripts of two plays—one a drama of conscience,[1] the other an historical drama—and ends the visit by reciting a stanza from Hugo's "Arc de Triomphe."

Insistent throughout this novel, the copious allusions to literature, the use of *ekphrases*, the incorporation of extraneous texts and of characters from other works: all appear to serve a mimetic function, conveying the atmosphere of *Belle Epoque* Paris and delineating the character of the Head of State, but they are finally subversive, drawing our attention away from what is represented to how it is represented. Here the use of period detail, one of the most common strategies for conveying a sense of the past, is so excessive that it verges on the parodic. In passages like this one, the disproportionate attention paid to the absurd detail sends up any notion of a history of everyday life:

> Los monjes de todos los higroscopios alemanes vivieron con la capucha caída sobre la nuca; el campesino con paraguas de los higroscopios suizos permaneció oculto en su rústico chalet alpestre, dejando salir a la moza del delantal encarnado, personificación del buen tiempo (107).[2]

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1. Carpentier refers to it as a "drama de la conciencia." The Spanish *conciencia* can be either "conscience" or "consciousness." Since the Illustrious Academic's play concerns "David y Betsabé, cuyas noches de amor son envenenadas por el espectro de Urías," the more likely reading is "conscience." *El recurso*, on the other hand, involves an exploration of the dictator's consciousness, but not conscience, of which he has little.

2. Or this one: "Había gente, en estos días, que coleccionaba horribles máscaras africanas, figuras erizadas de clavos votivos, ídolos zoomorfos—obras de caníbales. De los Estados Unidos, nos venían músicas de negros. . . . Por ese camino llegaríamos a la exaltación de Atila, Eróstrato, los Iconoclastas, el cake-walk, la cocina inglesa,

The novel is profuse. It proceeds by a strategy of repetition, holding the mirror not to nature but to itself and to other texts. It is informed by this tension between the desire for presence—the need to recapture time and place—and the consciousness of absence that leads to both the piling on of detail in an *horror vacui* and the temptation to point defiantly at the process of creation.[3]

El recurso is in continuous oscillation between these two impulses, so that the same gesture that lays bare the artifice becomes part of its density—and vice-versa. Unstable, too, is the *locus* of value which fluctuates between France and America, following the mental as well as physical discursions of the peripatetic dictator. The two movements are connected. The dictator is a performer, a source of authority that has no ground; the narration is a performance that may reflect nothing but itself. The subject of this essay will be the alternation between the kind of representation that attempts to elide the process of mediation and the kind that plays up that process; it is also concerned with the dispersal of meaning which suggests there is, ultimately, no authoritative source of truth. Such a tendency is disturbing in a novel purporting to communicate a moment typical of early twentieth-century Latin American history that is part of a greater historical process—world revolution, presumably real. I shall take up this point toward the end of these pages.

Carpentier has written that in the great European cities, "los decorados se venden hechos . . . tienen un estilo fijado para siempre" (*DF* 16-17). He exploits this potentially stultifying notion in *El recurso* to evoke the period

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los atentados anarquistas, bajo el reinado de las nuevas Magas Circe que ahora se llamaban Lyane de Pougy, Emilienne d'Alencon [sic] o Cléo de Mérode" (24-25). Here the concatenation of elements from widely different spheres of life demonstrates the Academic's prejudiced reaction to all that involves change—that is, it functions as mimesis—but it also produces a carnivalesque effect. The suggestion that the cakewalk has the same value as the discovery of primitive art or the Anarquist movement inevitably calls attention to the *ars combinatoria* shaping the passage.

3. In this regard, see Djelal Kadir's discussion of Carpentier's baroque in *El reino de este mundo*. Kadir sees Carpentier as caught "between the nostalgia for a world of 'faith' with its own logos which, as he desired in his 1949 prologue [to *El reino*], pre-exists rational discourse, and a world of language whose articulation renders the object of its parlance a subversive and self-deflecting schema of texturality" (103, in general 86-104). Along the same lines, González Echevarría observes that "the overall movement of each text is away from literature into immediacy, whether by a claim to be integrated within a larger context, Latin American reality or history, or by an invocation of the empirical author. But because of the dialectics just sketched, the voyage always winds up in literature" (*Pilgrim* 22). As I shall argue, the move into immediacy is more apparent than real; even in the Latin American context, the process of mediation is made manifest. Kadar, Djelal. *Questing Fictions: Latin America's Family Romance*. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1986.

and suggest the dreams of his *rastaquouère* head of a state, and also to adumbrate the relationship between art and history. His vision of Paris unfolds under the sign of stasis. For the dictator, blissfully unaware that the Great War will put an end to the *Belle Epoque*, the city is an unchanging utopia where he can cultivate the good life after the bounce and scramble of his journey up the social ladder. His mansion on the Rue de Tilsitt is both an extension of his ideal self and a reduction of his idealized view of Paris; it mediates between the parvenu Prime Minister and the city, serving to naturalize his appearance in a social circle valued precisely for its reputation of being impenetrable and unchangeable.[4]

Much of the imagery in the opening pages of the novel suggests that here the dictator has found his true center: he arises in the morning and advances "hacia la claridad" (11), opening the curtain to gaze out on the Arc de Triomphe, with its sense of promise. He is the center of attention of a series of efficient attendents and encircled, quite literally, by his collection of art. His personal progress from the swamps of Surgidero de la Verónica to the great boulevards where he feels he has finally achieved the personal goal "de hacerse gente" is paralleled by the view of history embodied in this collection. With the exceptions of the Elstir (to be discussed later) and the view of Nueva Córdoba (a piece of nostalgia), the works convey both an exalted conception of history, leading from Gérôme's gladiators through Jean-Paul Laurens' crusaders to Rude's Marseillaise (clearly visible from the window and included as the last item in the inventory), and an idealized sense of the present time and place: turn-of-the-century Paris, culmination of centuries of progress.[5]

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4. Although the Arc de Triomphe was completed in 1836, the area around the Place de l'Etoile was not built up until the middle of the nineteenth century when it was incorporated into the city. Like most of Haussmann's design, this section accommodated the expectations of the increasingly powerful upper middle class; the aristocracy continued to inhabit the old quarters (Saalman 16 and 44). It is not by chance that Carpentier situates the Prime Minister here. As Romero points out, the transformation of Paris carried out by Haussmann inspired the rebuilding of a number of the Latin American capitals, and the Second Empire style became a standard among the newly rich for both the mansion and the public building (274-80).

5. All these painters are referred to in *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*. All, except for Dumont, were members of the Ecole de France. Jean Bérard (1849-1936) "s'inspira de la vie moderne pour se créer un genre particulier" (I: 567). His paintings can be seen in museums in Liege, Lille, Tours and Troyes. Paul-Charles Chocarne-Moreau (1855-1931) "se plaît à mettre de la gaîté dans ses toiles en cherchant le côté plaisant des choses" (II:327). He favored subjects such as chimney sweeps, ragamuffins and flower girls. He won a bronze medal at the 1889 World's Fair, and the state bought many of his paintings. Some of his works hang now in the Musée de Cambrai. Although there were a number of Dumonts active at the turn-of-the-century, the one referred to here is probably the genre painter

The collection provides an index to mainstream French taste in the pre-war period; academic paintings like these were prized for what was considered to be their faithful representation of the subject. Raymond Rudorff comments that "it was believed that there was only one way to paint a picture" (97-98). The inference is that there was also only one way to view reality. This popular form of Cartesianism that suggests reality is both readily apprehensible to and shared by right thinking individuals is contravened throughout the novel, where different realities are juxtaposed and all prove to be equally elusive. According to Rudorff, this was an art designed to "instruct, adorn, edify and exalt" (97), but *not* to question, and certainly not to disturb. It remained curiously unaware of the profound changes that were being forged in Western art right underneath its nose:

> Most of the critics, the public and buyers generally agreed that French art had reached an ideal state and was destined to continue as before, with each new generation of artists faithfully adhering to established styles and standards. (Rudorff 98)

Among the affluent living in Paris at the time, the consensus seems to have been that contemporary life, like contemporary art, had reached a state of perfection that it was hoped might be prolonged indefinitely by repetition.

This notion of an ideal stasis, embodied in the mansion with its comforting daily rituals and its carefully cultivated atmosphere of continuity and distinction, is parodied in the dictator's second Parisian home: the brothel run by Madame Yvonne. Duplicated, the mansion no longer functions as the center of value. The ostentatious theatricality that is the brothel's hallmark exposes the self-consciousness with which the scene on the Rue de Tilsitt is staged. There is more: Madame Yvonne, animating spirit of the brothel, is a figure suspiciously like the dictator. A self-made woman who hovers at the edge of

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Alfred-Paul-Emile-Etienne Dumont (1828-1894) of the Ecole Suisse. Some of his work is exhibited in the museum at Basel. Jean-León Gérome (1824-1904), perhaps the best known painter in the dictator's collection, specialized in historical subjects and is represented in the Louvre and the Wallace Collection, as well as other museums. Henri Gervex (1852-1929) was famous in his day for his nudes, particularly his *Rolla*. He did the panels in the foyer of the Opéra-Comique and a wall in the Hôtel de Ville, and his *Satyr et Bacchante* hangs in the Louvre; however, "Son plus sûr titre de gloire est d'avoir compté au nombre des amis de Renoir" (IV: 223). Finally, Luc-Olivier Merson (1845-1920) painted historical, religious and legendary themes. *Le loup de Gubbio*, probably his best known painting, is in the museum at Lille. The largest collection of his works hangs in the museum in Chantilly. All of the Prime Minister's paintings contribute to the consolidation of the rich and powerful. Even Chocarne-Moreau's study of a chimney sweep lends itself to the sanctification of the good life by sentimentalizing—i.e. naturalizing—poverty.

gentility, she manipulates an exquisite sense of decorum and a French that "según los casos y la condición del cliente, pasaba del estilo Port-Royal al estilo Bruant—muy semejante en esto," muses her client, "a mi francés mixto de Montesquieu y *Nini-peau-de-chien*" (14).

As though to remind us of the brothel's parodic function—duplication with an ironic difference—there is in it a "Palacio de los Espejos," where, we are told in a baroque simile, the dictator has seen himself in every physical position so often that those images are impressed on his memory "como en un álbum de fotografías familiares se repertorian los gestos, actitudes, desplantes y atuendos que marcaron las mejores jornadas de una existencia" (14); temporal movement is fixed in the image, and the love of family is mirrored in a different kind of transaction.

In the brothel, time seems to stand still. A prostitute dressed as a bride "se hacía desflorar cuatro o cinco veces cada noche" (13). One of the rooms is a copy of a berth on the sleeping car of a train, its run "eternamente detenido" (13). Another is a replica of a stateroom on the *Titanic*, hovering on the edge of a disaster always imminent yet never realized except in *la petite mort* that is effectively the journey's end. Enshrined in yet another room is the especially designed armchair to which Edward VII accomodated his erotic exertions—a paradox of sedentary activity. In the carefully preserved armchair, the train and *Titanic* rooms, the ever-virgin prostitute and the metaphorical photo album, the flow of history is arrested, as it is on the printed page and in the Prime Minister's collection of paintings, where succession is laid-out in a physical space that admits repeated readings or viewings. The parodic exaggeration of Madame Yvonne's efforts to defy the passage of time reminds us that, viewed as real life, theirs is a precarious utopia. It is only through art that an immutable present can be achieved. But this is the present tense of the imagination, not of the world.

A kind of perpetuity has been achieved, of course, by the Prime Minister's most outrageous double: the globe-trotting mummy, whose transatlantic misadventures recall Evita's. The mummy is part of the pattern of images that opposes the clean, well-lighted house on the Rue de Tilsitt, a projection of the Prime Minister's ideal self, to the dark cave, most basic of refuges, which is both womb and tomb: origin and end. The mummy has a definite commodity value, but the fascination it exercises over the Prime Minister has little to do with cultural prestige. Its enigmatic presence enfolds both the dark past of America and the dark future—deposition and death—that awaits his interlocutor. The identification between the mummified *cacique* and the dictator is established in parallel scenes: one in which the Head of State poses for his tailor, noting "Doy vueltas sobre mí mismo, como maniquí, deteniéndome en ángulos favorables a una buena iluminación de mi persona" (16),[6] and another

6. The scene that involves the Palacio de los Espejos in the brothel (mentioned above) has the same effect.

in which the mummy is posed for photographs—"Ahí la tienen fotografiada en todos sus ángulos" (104). Virtually the last comment the dictator ever makes is addressed to the figure, now encased in glass in the Trocadero: "No te quejes, cabrón, que te saqué de tu fanguero para hacerte gente" (334).

According to the standard set by Paris, this has been the goal of the Prime Minister's life. But in the end, effectively confined to the dark upper reaches of his mansion while Ofelia reigns in the reception rooms, the Ex, as he calls himself after he has been deposed, is as out of place in the city of his dreams as the mummy in the Trocadero. The house which once mediated betwen him and Paris is now closed in upon itself; like the cave, the attic has no view. As he approaches death, the Ex regresses toward childhood, and here too he is preceded by the mummy, perenially curled in a fetal position. His effort to confound both time and space through a culinary return to a lost America—the dainty madeleine transmogrified into gargantuan feasts involving *tamales*, *chicharrones* and great quantities of *caña*—is delusory. Only in Père Lachaise is the utopian ideal of the perfect present realized. Emblematically, the Ex—now doubly Ex—is interred between the tombs of Baudelaire and General Aupic and the tomb of Porfirio Díaz; that is, somewhere between the pen and the sword, between poetry and history—in other words, in the never-never land of fiction.

The vision of a lost America superimposed on Paris is not just a product of the dictator's dotage. Consistently in this novel, Carpentier represents Paris in relation to America. On the first page, for example, just as one series of images suggests that the dictator has found his center, another hints at something quite different. We are told that he awakes in his hammock "con la sensación de estar *allá,*" imagines Elmira sleeping "en la noche del otro hemisferio," looks out on a view where "en vez de un volcán—nevado, majestuoso, lejano, antigua Morada de Dioses—se me acerca el Arco de Triunfo," spots the house belonging to Porfirio Diaz's minister of finance, Yves Limantour, with whom he discusses "jodederas nuestras," accepts coffee brought in on a tray made of "hermosa y espesa plata de mis minas," coffee that is "Bien fort comme il l'aime. A la façon de lá-bàs" (11). It is not simply a question of economic dependence, it is that, like the *conquistadores*, who could only apprehend the New World in terms of Europe, the Prime Minister's appreciation of *his* New World depends on a constant awareness of "el lado de allá" for meaning. It is tempting to see this as a little allegory of representation in which presence must be defined by absence and the familiar provides the only entry point for the unfamiliar.[7]

Of course, back home, the Prime Minister measures the capital by a European standard, exulting in its pell-mell dash to catch up with the architecture and high life of Paris at the same time that he laments the loss of familiar

7. See, for example, David Carroll (116) and Gombrich (*passim*).

views. These shifts in the locus of value depend on a series of antinomies that suggest the distinction between civilization and barbarism only to complicate the terms until the neat divider no longer serves. A case in point is the relationship between the Arc de Triomphe and the tutelary volcano. As it is set up on the first page of the novel, the relationship opposes nature to artifice and an ancient pagan cult to one of the crowning monuments of the Capital of Reason. But the slumbering volcano also represents the outrage of an oppressed people. The arch, intended to commemorate the French Republic's revolutionary wars, has come to stand for a sense of patriotism of marked rightist tendencies that is not notably rational, the kind espoused by the Illustrious Academic. Rude's "Marseillaise," the bas-relief which adorns one of the sides, represents the Republic going into war to defend its freedom, but it reminds the Prime Minister of the *caudillos*, motivated by greed and the desire for power. Hugo's "A l'Arc de Triomphe," a stanza of which the Prime Minister recites for the Illustrious Academic, represents the same sort of smug and overblown patriotism. But there is more: in the same poem (stanzas the leader does not recite) Hugo refers to the monuments of unjust nations—so unlike those of France, he points out—whose foundations are tainted with blood. The poet predicts that these monuments will not withstand the passage of time because a just god will command nature to take them over again.Years later in the homeland, economic shortages and political

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8. In May 1968, as Carpentier surely knew, it was a rallying point for a huge demonstration in support of the regime.

9. Hugo writes:

> C'est qu'on n'a pas caché de crimes dans ta base,
> Ni dans tes fondements de sang qui s'extravase!
> C'est qu'on ne te fit point d'un ciment hasardeux!
> C'est qu'aucun noir forfait, semé dans ta racine
> Pour jeter quelque jour son ombre à ta ruine,
> Ne mêle à tes lauriers son feuillage hideux!
> Tandis que ces cités, dans leur cendre enfouies,
> Furent pleines jadis d'actions inouïes,
> Ivres de sang versé.
> Si bien que le Seigneur a dit à la nature:
> Refais-toi des palais dans cette architecture
> Dont l'homme a mal usé!
> Aussi tout est fini. Le chacal les visite;
> Les murs vont décroissant sous l'herbe parasite;
> L'étang s'installe et dort sous le dôme brisé;
> Sur les Nérons sculptés marche la bête fauve;
> L'antre se creuse où fut l'incestueuse alcôve,
> Le tigre peut venir où le crime a passé! (2:215).

unrest bring about the partial collapse of the city, including presumably the dictator's chief monuments—the Capitol and the Model Prison, which contains corpses of suspected enemies encased in the poured concrete foundation.

The Arc also reflects the dictator's personal relationship with Paris. Monumental embodiment of the ambitions of a more illustrious outsider—the Corsican, Napoleon—, it serves him as a fixed point of reference. When he is immersed in furious modernization back in "la capital," its remembered image provides a comforting reminder that Paris will always be Paris. However, when the Prime Minister's Parisian acquaintances begin to snub him, he longs to see the German army marching victorious through its gates, and in his perception the erstwhile solid structure grows or shrinks according to the news from the front. Much later, the Arc serves the Mayorala as a landmark for her own itinerary of Paris. Blissfully unaware of its historic significance, she sails through it every day on her way to the Madeleine (a little joke here), where she buys the cane syrup indispensable to their nostalgic feasts. In this round-about way, the Arc finally marks both the defeat of the Prime Minister's dream of conquering "le tout Paris" and his emotional regression to things American.

At the same time that he explodes the clichés of national identity suggested by these series of opposed images, Carpentier reproduces other national clichés in hilarious vignettes that occur throughout the text. The description of the German crews that are interned when their ships are captured, for example, is a catalogue of received ideas:

> . . . empezaron a construir unos lindos chalets de estilo renano, en tanto que otros sembraban gladiolos y apisonaban la tierra para hacer dos campos de tenis. Tres semanas después, la finca

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Of the devolution of the capital to nature, Carpentier writes: "ocurría que la ciudad nueva descrecía—ésa era la palabra: *descrecía*—tan rápidamente como hubiese crecido. Lo grande se achicaba, se achataba, se encogía, como regresando al légamo de fundación. . . . Despintados, descuidados, los edificios se integraban en una suerte de grisalla urbana que degradaba, descalabraba, envejecía lo que fuera moderno un día para envolverlo en la vejez de lo que ya era viejo a comienzos del siglo. . . . las vastas urbanizaciones, repartos, parcelamientos de las afueras, eran reconquistadas por las hierbas bajadas de la montaña: Hierbas que volvían a la Capital con su escolta de campánulas y festivos penachos; y, tras de las Hierbas, las Matas, y tras de las Matas los Palos, los Helechos Arborescentes, las criaturas vegetales del Pronto Andar y del Pronto Crecer, sombreando las menudas rocallas a donde ya regresaban las Culebras Exiladas para desovar al fresco" (245-247). Lewis Mumford refers to this process in which the city crumbles and returns to nature by the biological term *Abbau* (150-52).

> estaba hecha una granja modelo. Había biblioteca, con poemas de Enrique Heine y hasta del socializante Dehmel. Aquello carecía de mujeres, desde luego, pero muchos no las necesitaban porque eran bastante homosexuales. . . . Y, como eran muy músicos, reuniendo los instrumentos que habían traído a bordo de los buques, empezaron a tocar pequeñas obras de Haydn, de Mendelssohn y de Raff—la 'Cavatina,' sobre todo. (163)

When these cultural caricatures are rendered from the Prime Minister's or the Illustrious Academic's viewpoint, a mimetic function can be adduced: they convey the characters' prejudices. But this is only sometimes the case. They are often presented from what purports to be an objective point of view. No matter what the narrative position, they *always* call our attention to the act of fabrication.

In the essay cited earlier, Carpentier argues that the challenge confronting American novelists is to inscribe the physiognomy of their cities on world literature (14). Yet, the home scenes in *El recurso* are not situated in Havana or Caracas, but in the unnamed capital of an unnamed country that synthesizes American geography and uses, providing a schema for the representation of a great number of Latin American cities without actually representing any one city, like the Renaissance pattern-books that furnished artists with a general vocabulary of images to be used as a basis for individual representations. By dint of the sort of cultural reductionism that characterizes his national caricatures, Carpentier presents an America viewed from a perspective that fails to differentiate between disparate geographical areas and cultural and linguistic spheres. Like Conrad's Costagüana and Valle Inclán's Zamalpoa, it is viewed from a European perspective. Quintessentially American, Carpentier's country is also the kind of wonderland that exists only on the page. His insistence on the theatrical, which is especially marked in his description of the capital, is of course related to the war-time economic boom that works dramatic changes in the cityscape almost overnight—that is, it functions as mimesis—but it may also be a tongue-in-cheek reminder that "la Ciudad-Opera, Capital de la Ficción" (195) is exactly that.

In this dialectic of representation that playfully counters mimesis with poesis, *El recurso* contests the Cartesian view that the proper use of language corresponds precisely to a universal rational method, which in turn adequately represents the underlying order of nature. Such a view insists that meaning is fixed and language both transparent and stable; that is, it denies the play of ambiguity and the eccentric. Timothy J. Reiss argues that this attitude, which became widespread by the 1740's, is the result of a fundamentally political activity directed to the stabilizing of civil society:

> The tetrad of Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, and Descartes. . . saw method, language, natural philosophy, and political order as for-

> ming a single network. The new concept of poetical representation becomes the focal point organizing this network of relations. (224)

Accordingly, the king is viewed as both "the principal poet of his country and the unique sovereign. He brings political and linguistic stability" (229). The parodic inversion of Descartes' thinking signaled in the title of *El recurso* involves not only the ironic application of Cartesian principles to the least Cartesian of worlds and the least Cartesian of leaders while revealing the inherent dangerousness of Descartes' *morale provisoire*,[10] it also embraces Descartes' notions about language and representation. As his country's chief orator, if not poet, the dictator (i.e. one who dictates, an idea also explored throughout Roa Bastos' *Yo el Supremo*) certainly has a gift for the gab, but his taste in rhetoric tends toward the baroque; it is richly embroidered with

> espadas de Dámocles, pasos del Rubicón, trompetas de Jericó, Cyranos, Tartarines y Clavileños, revueltos con altivas palmeras, señeros cóndores y onicrótalos alcatraces.

Fond of quotation, the Head of State lards his speech with literary allusions and is not above lifting material when it suits him, as he does for the inauguration of the new capitol, borrowing in that instance from Renan. In this parody of his own writing, Carpentier provides the dictator with a style that points not toward an underlying order clear to anyone possessed of common sense, such as Descartes prescribed, but to the language itself or to other texts. His speech, then, does not remit the listener (or reader) to a universal system of referents, but rather allows for the play of meaning. It accords well with the tropical taste of his countrymen and denies the efficacy of a universal grammar, de-centering the Cartesian universe while it affirms the difference—linguistic and cultural—of the periphery.

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10. In an interview that coincided with the publication of the novel, Carpentier commented on his use of Descartes: "hay un constante oposición entre un pensamiento cartesiano que, mal usado, podría encubrir los peores excesos. O sea a lo contrario de lo que Descartes pensaba y que demasiado a menudo se ha visto en nuestro continente" (*El Día* 16). Frances Wyers Weber discusses the subject in detail focussing primarily on the ironic inversion whereby the *Discours de la méthode* serves as a standard for judging the dictator and his methods (323-34). Wladimir Krynsinski argues that "ce palier discursif d'ordre méta-narratif [the quotations from Descartes] constitue une sorte de miroir de la démarche sémiotique du 'vrai narrateur'" at the same time that the insertion of Descartes' words in the novel leads us to question their value (394-97). Gónzalez Echevarría points out that the title also refers to Vico's *ricorsi* and that it is intended to bring to mind not only the *Discours* but the Vico-Descartes debate as well (258-260).

However, although this use of language opens up a multivalent discourse, asserting the value of the disparate perspective, it also is subject to abuse. Taking advantage of the divorce between signifier and signified, the dictator manipulates language for his own ends. He meets every crisis with a flood of decrees and pronouncements until, at one point, words fail him, their divorce from the current situation made just a bit too blatant:

> . . . nada de *Libertad*—con las cárceles llenas de presos políticos. . . .Nada de *Virtudes* cuando se le sabía dueño de las mejores empresas del país. Nada de *Legítimos Derechos*—puesto que los ignoraba cuando chocaban con su personal jurisprudencia. El vocabulario, decididamente, se le angostaba. (123)

Hardly prone to soul-searching, he deals with the situation simply by finding a new set of words, "La Santa Cruzada de la Latinidad" (126), which have the great virtue of signifying nothing. González Echevarría argues that the Head of State's official pronouncements are "a parody of political rhetoric in which speech is the product of a muddled mind" (VM 73). However, the novel makes it clear that the dictator uses language quite consciously to achieve his own ends. To wit: "sabía que con tales artificios de lenguaje había creado un estilo que ostentaba su cuño y que el empleo de palabras, adjetivos, epítetos inusitados, que mal entendían sus oyentes, lejos de perjudicarlo, halagaba, en ellos, un atávico culto a lo preciosista y floreado" (48).

Although González Echevarría points out that Carpentier "demystifies the notion of authority by identifying himself with the dictator" (VM 73) since "one cannot but see in the music-loving, erudite First Magistrate, who divides his life between Latin America and Paris, a parody of Carpentier himself" (73), he does not make the connection between their rhetorical styles. Yet, both employ a polyphonic discourse in which immediacy gives way to allusion and meaning becomes meanings that are often incompatible. What suits the dictator's ends—confounding his adversaries, impressing his friends—is less apt for the novelist, who does not quite manage to synthesize the contradictory impulses that inform his narrative.

Carpentier always writes against a background of literature. In the essay cited earlier, he notes, tellingly, "difícil es *revelar* algo que no ofrece información libresca preliminar, un archivo de sensaciones, de contactos, de admiraciones epistolarias" (18). The brilliant descriptions of the rapidly modernized capital are inspired not only by his research into American documents of the period and his own experiences, but also, I suspect, by Baudelaire's evocation in "Le Cygne" of the violent disruptions wrought in mid-century Paris by the demolition of the medieval city and the construction of Haussmann's boulevards:

> Je ne vois qu'en esprit tout ce camp de baraques,
> Ces tas de chapiteaux ébachés et de fûts,

> Les herbes, les gros blocs verdis par l'eau des flaques,
> Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus. (79)[11]

Even the scene in the mummy's cave, where the dictator comes face to face with the pre-historic past, is mediated through literary and operatic allusions. In response to the storm that tears down their tents, the Head of State quotes from *King Lear* and Doctor Peralta answers with the *Puñal del godo*, while the cavern where they take shelter reminds the leader of one of the sets in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which he has just seen in New York, and inspires Colonel Hoffmann to attempt an aria from *Siegfried* because it brings to his mind the grottoes frequented by Alberich and Mime.

True, the bizarre dislocations that mark the trajectory of the imaginary capital are grounded in historical fact: many American cities underwent virtually the same transformations. Angel Rama writes that "cualquier divertido lector de la revista habanera *Social*, que estuvo al servicio de la *high life* de 1918 a 1936, habrá de vivir el permanente júbilo de re-conocimiento" (43). Urged, probably, by the nostalgic impulse to recapture a past remembered from his youth, as well as by a sense of historical consciousness, Carpentier creates a convincingly real world, only to remind the reader teasingly that what he purveys here is a product of the imagination.

The passages describing the arrival of the opera, the design and construction of the capitol and, especially, the preparations for the inauguration of the capitol (conveyed in a scene out of Cecil B. De Mille), which involves among other things painting over the wilted leaves of the newly planted trees: all of

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11. Carpentier evokes the site of the new capital during the periods of inactivity brought on by the misappropriation of funds as "aquel raro paisaje de mármoles revueltos, metopas a medio labrar, pilares truncos, bloques de piedra entre cementos y arenas" (160), where a skating rink is opened and various circus shows are held, including an exhibition of animals, like the menagerie from which Baudelaire's swan has escaped. Carpentier's tone is amused; Baudelaire's melancholy, almost tragic. But the sense of being in exile even at home that is the subject of Baudelaire's poem and that is, in part, brought on by the rapid changes in the urban scene—"Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)" (78)—is reflected onto the Prime Minister, who is saddened by the expansion that he himself has promoted and winds up feeling cut off from the scenes he has loved: "Contemplando aquel urbe que le crecía y le crecía, el Primer Magistrado se angustiaba a veces ante la modificación del paisaje visto desde las ventanas del Palacio. . . . El Volcán . . . morada de Antiguos Dioses . . . era menos volcán—menos morada de Antiguos Dioses—cuando se insinuaba su majestad, en las mañanas, anebladas [sic], con pudores de rey humillado, de monarca sin corte, sobre los humos inmediatos y espesos, despedidos por cuatro altas bocas de la gran Central Eléctrica, recién inaugurada. Al verticalizarse, al geometrizarse . . . la ciudad se iba cerrando sobre su Príncipe" (151-152).

these sections focus on the process rather than the product. Not only in the actual opera sets, but also in the capitol, the spruced up palms and the fanciful mansions of the newly rich, the end result is more theatrical than solid, more illusion (or *allusion*) than concrete construction. The capitol building is a copy of the capitol in Washington, and the other new constructions are

> verdaderas decoraciones de teatro en tonalidades de Medioevos, Renacimientos o Andalucías hollywoodianas . . . cuando no se remedaban, en edificios grandes, los Segundos Imperios del Boulevard Haussmann. El nuevo Correo Central tenía un magnífico Big-Ben (*sic*). La nueva Primera Estación de Policía era Templo de Luxor, de color verde Nilo. La residencia campestre del Ministro de Hacienda, era preciosa miniatura del Palacio de Schönbrunn. El Presidente de la Cámara alojaba su querida en una pequeña Abadía de Cluny revestida de yedras importadas. (195)

This sort of description suggests the cultural and, ultimately, economic insubstantiality of the modernized capital—that is, it is representational—but it also foregrounds the *process* of creating an illusion, whether in masonry or in words.

Overtly fictive is the passage which correlates the plummeting price of sugar with the progress of the opera season, a passage modeled on events that took place in the summer of 1920 during Caruso's stay in Havana. Carpentier writes:

> . . . entre preludios de orquesta y calderones de tenores, el azúcar de la República había sufrido una pavorosa merma en . . . las Bolsas mundiales. A 23 centavos-libra se pagaba nuestro azúcar cuando Nicoletti-Korman, magnífico demonio, elevaba sus loas al Becerro de Oro. Con el himno norteamericano que suena en el primer acto de *Madame Butterfly*, descendía a 17.20. Se cotizaba a 11.35 con *Thais* . . . Puesto en nefasto día de *Rigoletto*—y dicen que los jorobados traen buena suerte—cayó a 8.40. Las barajas trucadas del cuarto acto de *Manón* apresuraron el despeño que, con el desastre de *Aída*, nos dejó en 5.22. (205)

What begins here as a witty means of bringing together two disparate phenomena—the opera season and the sugar disaster—ends by suggesting a cause and effect relationship between the operatic and the economic tragedies that operates according to the law of sympathetic magic which, as Borges points out, is characteristic of fiction.[12] The violent yoking together of food,

12. In "El arte narrativo y la magia," Borges argues that "la [ley] de la simpatía, que postula un vínculo inevitable entre cosas distantes, ya porque su figura es igual—magia

clothing, language and uses, typical of very different regions, has the same effect, providing a constant reminder to the American, if not the European, reader that "el país" is an imaginary construct.

A more disquieting reminder of that fact is the inclusion in a list detailing the instruments of torture used in local police stations of "mazorcas de maíz—esto, para las mujeres" (183). The playful allusion to Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, in which the impotent villain rapes the young woman he has abducted with just that object, tends to deflect meaning, pointing not toward a circumstantial reality, but toward another text. The inference, probably unintentional but nonetheless inevitable, is that the dictator's methods are part of the writer's resources, a timeless literary motif.

The protagonist's own reality is put in doubt in the very first chapter of the novel, where we are told that he owns a painting by Elstir, listens to music by Vinteuil and cultivates the acquaintance of Madame Verdurin. The inclusion of these figures out of *A la recherche du temps perdu* breaks the frame of what purports to be a true history, exposing its basis in literature.[13] The same thing is implied by the Ex's last words, cribbed from Augustus Caesar: "Acta est fabula" (338), "the play is finished." In other words, like the plot that chronicles it, his life has been an illusion, a shadow of other lives.[14] In their conversation, the Student and Julio Antonio Mella echo another version of the line—Joseph de Maistre's:

> Combien de fois, depuis l'origine de cette épouvantable révolution et des guerres fatales qu'elle a amenées, avons-nous eu toutes les raisons du monde de dire: *Acta est fabula* et cependant la scène continue toujours! (*Fleurs* 9).

Whereas De Maistre, from his position on the extreme right, wrote lamenting the excesses of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the Student

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imitativa, homeopática—ya por el hecho de una cercanía anterior—magia contagiosa" holds sway in the novel, which must be "un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades [donde] todo episodio . . . es de proyección ulterior" (230-31). The opera-sugar connection is both imitative and contagious.

13. For studies of Carpentier's appropriation of Proust in the novel, see Dorfman and Faris. Neither of them discusses the de-realizing effect that the presence of Proustian characters has on *El recurso*.

14. The plagiarized valediction, incidentally, passes from Caesar to the dictator by way of Rabelais, who appropriated the expression on his own death bed, but with the significant amendment: "La farce est jouée," an ending that might have been closer to the mark, if less flattering (*Fleurs latines* 9).

and Mella give the images a very different idealogical application. But perhaps the repetition is as important as the difference:

> —'Tumbamos a un dictador. . . . Pero sigue el mismo combate, puesto que los enemigos son los mismos. Bajó el telón sobre un primer acto que fue larguísimo. Ahora estamos en el segundo que, con otras decoraciones y otras luces, se está pareciendo ya al primero.' . . . —'Y hace cien años que se repite el espectáculo.' —'Hasta que el público se canse de ver lo mismo.' (326-327)

Hanging in both the mansion on the Rue de Tilsitt and in the country house at Marbella are seascapes painted by Elstir. Of these seascapes, which he refers to as almost mirages, Marcel writes, "les reflets avaient presque plus de solidité et de réalité que les coques vaporisées par un effet de soleil" (I: 837) Again, the inference is the same: the protagonist, the other characters, the time and place and series of events, all of which seem so full of life, so convincing, are reflections of something else, but that something else regresses into literature, so that the image of an instrument of torture calls to mind not a real instrument but an allusion in another novel to an instrument of torture, and the description of a painting brings to mind not the image of a painting but another description of a painting in another work of literature.

The point here is not that the Prime Minister is "unreal" because he is inauthentic and his life a farce. Instead, issues of this sort are dissolved into the continuum of literature. From the historical and political perspective, the tendency is disturbing. In her study of what she calls historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon writes that the novels in this group do not question the existence of an objective reality, but rather question our ability to understand it unproblematically (19). They take as explicit theme "the relation, or rather the conflict, between art and history, between literature and life" (7) as, for example, does *Yo el Supremo*, which is structured around this conflict. In *El recurso* it is not subject to discussion. What is unsettling here is that the novel ostensibly presents a significant period in the development of the Latin American republics while it covertly undermines the notion that history is a shaping force in the narrative and, by extension, casts doubt on its significance in the life of that continent or human life in general. True, *El recurso* is not strictly speaking an historical novel since it relates events that are typical rather than actual, but it ostensibly effects what Frederic Jameson calls "the concept of history" (*60s* 180). Actually, it remits the reader to a realm that lies close to the circular ruins of Borges. Carpentier seems to want things both ways—to represent a significant external reality and to expose that representation as a fiction. Yet this exposure is effected in such a way that it subverts confidence not only in the representation but in the reality itself.

In an emblematic scene near the end of the novel, the deposed dictator, together with Elmira and Mendoza, pause at Notre Dame de Paris at the same

moment that the Student, en route to the First World Congress against Colonial and Imperialist Politics in Brussels, stops there. Their very different reactions to the cathedral suggest the two visions of experience that the novel, as I see it, *intends* to convey. The Ex uses the cathedral as a point of departure to recount "verídicas historias" (323) straight out of Hugo to the admiring Elmira;[15] the Student focuses instead on the sweeping vertical lines of the structure and the conception of history communicated in the great roseate windows. In other words, the dictator is concerned with the anecdote, the representation, and he makes no distinction between fiction and history. The Student takes the long view, sees the structure that supports the decoration, the vision of life that gave birth to the cathedral, and relates that vision to his own (Marxist) view of history as leading, ultimately if not easily, toward a terrestrial paradise.

This episode suggests that Carpentier, like Proust, conceived of his novel as a cathedral,[16] the plot centering on the Prime Minister (tragedy reduced to the level of farce), analogous to the grotesque figures carved on the tympanum and the lintels; the plot involving the Student and the evolution of political consciousness among the people (comic), representative of the structure of the cathedral itself.[17] Such a reading of the novel would align it with what Jameson describes in a recent article as the "national allegory":

> Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of the national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* ("Third-World Literature" 69)

In theory, Carpentier's novel works well within this schema; the use of titles instead of names for the most important characters directs the reader's atten-

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15. "la del archidiácono enamorado de una gitana que, a compás de pandero, hacía bailar una cabra blanca . . . ; la de un poeta vagabundo que amotinó a unos mendigos para que asaltaran la iglesia . . . ; la de un campanero jorobado, tambíen enamorado de la gitana . . . ; y la de dos esqueletos que aparecieron abrazados y que acaso fuesen los de Esmeralda y el campanero . . . " (323-324).

16. Actually, Proust makes the suggestion at the same time that he denies it: "je bâtirais mon livre, je n'ose pas dire ambitieusement comme une cathédrale, mais tout simplement comme une robe" (III: 1033).

17. In referring to farce and comedy, I am, of course, relying on Hayden White's discussion of Marx's emplotment of history (309-17).

tion to the novel's allegorical dimension.[18] In fact, the passages invoking the Student are programatic and thin, while the novel's real interest is concentrated on the play of "historias verídicas" that surround the figure of the dictator and that, as I have suggested, tend to deny the possibility of history. Opposed to Notre Dame is the house of another dame: Madame Yvonne's brothel, that favorite hangout of the Head of State. It is from this vantage point that Carpentier—who was a man of about the Prime Minister's age when the novel was written, and like him, a *rastaquouère* and a dictator wielding an authority based on the power of the word—gives the reader a knowing wink. With its hall of mirrors, with its reduction of time to space and history to repetition, this edifice is a far better emblem than the cathedral of *El recurso del método*.

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18. Oddly enough, *El recurso*'s allegorical potential has made a number of critics uneasy. Ariel Dorfman, for example, writes that in the novel, "se esboza un panorama que va más allá del período, del país o del tirano mismo. Pero sin caer en la alegoría . . . " (107). The problem, I would argue, is not that Carpentier "falls" into allegory, but that he fails to realize the allegory he attempts a bit half-heartedly.

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