

THE BOOM NARRATIVE: CRITIQUING THE MEANING OF HISTORY

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The fiction labeled "boom narrative" was associated with the political incidences of the Cold War, which effectively broke out in Latin America when Cuba joined the Soviet block in 1961, after the failed invasion of the island organized by the CIA. The Cold War revolved around the type of modernization Latin America would follow, either the global capitalism presided by transnational corporations, or the Soviet block version of socialism. With the Alliance for Progress launched in 1963, the administration of president John F. Kennedy committed massive military, financial and technical aid to Latin America, and encouraged transnational corporation investments to modernize production, communicational, educational and health infrastructures. There was a revolutionary pretention in this. In countries stereotyped as dominated by retrograde, oligarchic, dictatorial minorities, American intervention would create the conditions for the rise of middle classes that would stabilize democratic citizenship habits, and provide the economic leadership towards higher living standards defined

as consumerist life-styles. The geopolitical competition and the consumerist "boom" initiated in the 1960s conditioned the very favorable reception of the aesthetics posed by these novelists among the emerging middle classes who could afford books.

The geopolitical conflict brought to a crisis the ways of conceiving and reading history. Conflating a profound understanding of Latin American history and neo-Marxist, existentialist and surrealist aesthetics, the "boom" writers defined themselves as a "revolutionary" literary vanguard vaguely associated with the radical political stirrings of the times. This is the issue I want to raise and it requires a theoretical approach of similar conflation.

History and aesthetics should be understood as the ways in which the human species has refined through the ages our cognitive and sensual capacity to intervene in natural and social processes to pursue utopian visions that, in actual practical action, will further enrich our sensory, sensual and intellectual make up (Marx; Geras; Heller). The term includes any prophetic statement of a philosophical or political nature calling human beings to concerted, collective action to make concrete intellectual and emotional conceptions and sensibilities that will

define "the good society", "the common good", "the true quality of life", and "the ideal human being."

In practice, these visions collide with the salient fact of civilization —the material and symbolic surplus collectively produced and not consumed in immediate survival is arbitrarily distributed according to institutionalized hierarchies. Surplus accumulation and distribution are administrated according to customs, predominant religious and ethical norms, laws, institutions, circumstances, perceived needs and crises. These savings and allocations create degrees of plenty for decision-makers in control, and various degrees of material and spiritual scarcity for those who have little or no influence in the distributional process. Sex and gender valuations, religious, philosophical, legal, economic and artistic principles justify the plenty/scarcity divide. Dispossession of the majorities is made "natural" and "stable", according to the will of "god(s)", the need to preserve "tradition", "the soul of the people or the nation," "the scientific/rational administration of society." The underclass exhibits the spectacle of their devastation with their physical aspect, comportment, and expressive capacity in the social spaces to which they are confined.

The term *civilization* designates the enforcement of disciplines to maintain the predominating distributional criteria. Civilization is the virtual, potential, concrete, effective degree of violence needed by the political institutions, especially the State, to implement the alienations of the plenty/scarcity system. Human collectives are always affected by some material/spiritual scarcity and the yearning for some kind of plenty, some freedom from scarcity. The images, symbols, metaphors that foster and lead to personal and collective freedom projects are born and nourished within the alienations of civilization (Sartre). History, aesthetics, civilization, struggle for freedom are coexisting, interchangeable terms.

EMPIRE, HISTORY, AESTHETICS

European interventions inaugurated the modern history of Latin America imposing three main, consecutive civilization systems –Mercantilism (15th century to the mid-19th century); Free Trade, a.k.a. Liberalism (1850s to around 1910); Neo-liberalism, a.k.a. “globalization” (mid-1960s to the present).

Mercantilism defined the wealth of nations as the largest possible accumulation of gold and silver within a kingdom or, by default, secure the most favorable balance

of trade in international commerce. This encouraged the conquest of colonies or the establishment of trading outposts to extract these metals, round up slaves or the largest working population, sell or tax them, impose on them the highest prices for the goods they were forced to import exclusively from the metropolis, and the lowest prices for their exports to the metropolis. The Spaniards and the Portuguese redefined the New World space/population relationship. Major administrative cities and ports were built, surrounded by satellite towns and villages to concentrate indigenous peoples, surrounded by religious boarding schools, plantations, haciendas, manufacture sites and mining operations through which the colonial commerce was funneled. This geopolitical disposition served the empire to project an ideological ecumenism which was translated into literary epic structures –the epic rhetoric turned privateers such as Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo into heroes incarnating universal values unifying the colonies under one king, one religion, one language, one juridical and economic system. This cauldron spawned the racial laws, the various forms of discrimination, violence, exploitation, submission, miscegenation among races, resistance, rebellion, insurrection and corruption networks these laws established and called for; the

syntheses in music, dance, poetry, arts, cults, dress and language idiosyncratic of Latin America.

The Free Trade ideologies originated in England were one precipitating component of the civil wars of independence ignited in the first decades of the XIX century. Opening all Latin American regions to the exchange of a greater volume and diversity of goods with European and American markets would generate civilizations of greater wealth, complexity and higher culture. The new utopia required the best geographically situated land-owners and trading elites to establish new, sovereign States to terminate the Iberian commercial monopolies and directly control local, regional, and international commerce. The new States would have to gradually enforce another kind of ecumenism to make Free Trade practical – define national boundaries, create common legal grids to secure international capital investment, commerce, finance, settling balances of payment, currency exchange rates, internment and movement of capital and goods, and currency printing. As of the 1830s the ecumenical project unleashed rounds of civil wars that pitted the Free Trade elites against regional elites whose interests would be harmed by the importation of cheaper goods. Towards the end of the

19th century the issue had been settled in favor of the free-traders.

Liberal intellectuals conceived the Free Trade utopia as the application of practical science in the administration of government, social processes, agriculture, manufacture, commerce. It coincides with the notion of Modernity. History was conceived as a lineal progress in which racial pre-dispositions and ethnic values allowed some (European) nations to rear entrepreneurial elites whose innovation in the conduct of public policies made their countries leaders in that progression. Latin American countries had entered "late" into "modern history" because of their Iberian imperial connection. They could "catch up", expediting and accelerating their development by transferring to Latin America from Europe, via the free market, science, technology, goods and services, educational and administrative systems, progressive "mind sets", fashions, all kinds of symbolic-metaphorical systems.

There was a religious allegory in the background of the liberal utopia, in a way reflecting the biblical *Book of Exodus*. In two foundational essays, Esteban Echeverría's *Dogma socialista (Social Dogma)* (1837) and José Victorino Lastarria's *Discurso de incorporación a la Sociedad*

Literaria [de Chile] (Speech on my Inauguration as Member of the Literary Society) (1841) argue the Spanish empire had instilled in the Latin American populations a passive, submissive mentality, incapable of the initiatives required for citizenship in independent nations. Liberation from mental slavery was played out as a trek through the wilderness and its barbarism, in search of the promised land represented by the Europeanized city, where "civilized" customs, norms, and laws prevail and condition behavior for the betterment of humanity. Liberal intellectuals were the guiding prophets in this trek. Their prophecies fused an understanding of the "soul of the people" and the political tasks needed to accomplish the new utopia. The travails of the trek would transform the desert into farms, vermin and savage beasts into cattle and domesticated animals, brush and weeds into nutritious plants in farms and plantations, stone into cities. This entailed a program of literary production meant to observe and define the racial, ethnic and environmental conditioning factors of the national character. *Criollismo* (*Creolism*) has been one constant label applied by literary critics to this endeavor.

In important novels of the liberal project such as *Amalia* (1851) by the Argentinian José Mármol, *Martín Rivas*

(1866) by the Chilean Alberto Blest Gana and *María* (1867) by the Colombian Jorge Isaacs, the romance was the rhetorical genre used to convey the background allegory of these novels (Frye). The narratives witness a sacrificial ritual out of which emerges the type of hero expected to build the new civilization. These values gradually emerge as the eventual hero travails through spaces where contradictions of joy/suffering; love/hatred; fertility/death; sanity/madness; civilization/barbarism are staged and played out. The denouement comes with rituals ceremonies –a marriage, a death, a funeral– that serve as monuments portending the fate of the new bourgeois, the national family or the eternal memory of the foundational heroes of the nationality.

Time exposed the gap between social facts and the liberal utopia/allegory.

Free Trade generated enormous economic bonanzas in the construction industry – road building, bridges, waterways, water reservoirs, port facilities, warehousing, railroads, telegraph, food processing plants. The newly affluent bourgeoisies affirmed and enjoyed their status by building luxurious, European-style mansions. Municipal councils spent lavishly on parks, monuments and government buildings intended to approximate in prestige major Latin American

cities to their European counterparts. Speculation in stock marketed by fraudulent companies, currency speculation and uncontrolled money printing by private banks made for constant see-saws of very quick fortune-making and very fast ruinations. Real or spurious fortunes financed European garment fashions, liquors, the finest home accoutrements, nannies to teach the children French or English. Oligarchs, bankers and politicians transacted legal or shady businesses in elegant brothels known for the services of imported French prostitutes (*cocottes*). French champagne and keeping in luxury a beautiful European prostitute became premium status symbols. One ultimate life accomplishment for the oligarchies was living permanently in France on funds extracted from their Latin American properties (*los trasplantados*), or travelling there periodically to socialize with the European oligarchies and nobility, perhaps marrying their offspring into them.

The explosive production increment under Free Trade demanded a plentiful labor force not available in all Latin American countries. This led to massive immigration policies, as in Brazil and Argentina, and relocation of workers, either voluntarily or by deportation, as with the Mexican indians. The cost of labor was an ambiguous social issue for liberals. On the one hand, immigrants were

attracted with the promise of good salaries and opportunities, especially land homesteads; on the other, entrepreneurs secured for themselves high profits by depressing salaries as much as possible. Workers were pauperized with various strategies —enforcing production quotas hard or impossible to achieve; gouging prices of food and other essentials, especially alcohol, at company stores, and forcing workers to buy exclusively from them; generations of children forced to pay for old family debts in the company stores; charging high rent for miserable housing. The old Spanish cities and the mining sites had neither the physical plant nor the sanitary infrastructure to accommodate immigration or migration influxes. Entertainment was located in bars, cheap brothels, gambling houses controlled by political bosses, their mafia and police enforcers and terminators. Venereal disease, typhus, tuberculosis, cholera, alcoholism became rampant.

The XIX century ended with violent class strife. Workers in the key areas of capitalism —ports, mines, transportation, food processing-- organized into mutual aid societies and unions and carried out constant strike actions. Anarcho-syndicalists organized shock groups against police and armed forces detachments. Well-to-do young men fought them with their own "white guards." Great

massacres of workers occurred at the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th.

Administration of the Free Trade system generated a middle class of doctors, lawyers, military and police officers, engineers, agronomers, accountants, professors, teachers, bureaucrats. They formed guilds and parties that channeled their grievances against Free Trade policies. The social polarization intensified even more after the Soviet revolution in Russia and the rise of communism and fascism as worldwide movements. With Pope Leon XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) the Catholic Church tried to attenuate unrestricted Free Trade capitalism, injecting Christian values in labor relations so as to prevent the proliferation of atheistic forms of socialism.

The predominance of Free Trade by the end of the 19th century ironically brought about the near collapse of the independent States and the crisis of the national identities. The poetry and the short stories of Rubén Darío gave testimony to the sybaritic tastes and moral degeneracy of the oligarchies; the Naturalist novel exposed the oligarchic self-doubt and suspicion that they were genetically impeded for national leadership, as exemplified by *Sin rumbo (Rudderless)* (1885) and *En la sangre (In the Blood)* (1887) by the Argentinian Emilio Cambaceres; *La*

bolsa (Stock Exchange) (1891) by the Argentinian Julián Martel; *Sangre patricia (Patrician Blood)* (1902) by the Venezuelan Manuel Díaz Rodríguez; *Casa grande (The Manor)* (1908), by the Chilean Luis Orrego Luco.

THE "BOOM NARRATIVE": SATIRE OF IMPERIAL HISTORY

With a predominance of omniscient voices, liberal narratives of the 19th century mainly responded to the philosophical tenets of Positivism and its logic of racial and environmental conditioning of personality. This was given the rank of law of cause and effect and predictability of human behavior, a structure also used by authors espousing the communist notion of socialist realism in the 1930s and '40s. Introducing themselves as a literary vanguard, the "boom narrative" authors satirized this logic. Their texts confronted the reader with multiple narrators, difficult to identify, whose narrative segments appeared dispersed, arbitrarily fragmented, their signification codes purposefully obscured. Realistic, unconscious, mythical, surreal, subterranean/demonic levels of reality were combined and blended together.

These fusions were used to discredit two of the central tenets of the liberal conceptions of history and literary aesthetics --civilization building as an epic,

progressive, Europeanizing endeavor, and the sacrificial rituals needed to accomplish it. Carlos Fuentes alluded to this in two key sections of one of his most important interviews (Rodríguez Monegal):

Hay una historia paralizada. Hay una historia convertida en Estatua de la Historia, remitida a sí misma, regresada a sí misma. No hay progreso histórico, eso es lo que está diciendo un poco la novela: no hay escatología, hay un puro presente perpetuo. Hay la repetición de una serie de actos ceremoniales (126).

Me importa mucho la zona mítica y cuando hablo de la zona sagrada, claro, estoy estableciendo un territorio, un recinto. Es la idea antiquísima del templo, del templo como la defensa contra la epidemia, contra el sitio [...]; el *dónde*: el lugar que es todos los lugares y en el que tiene sede el mito. Se me ocurre que nuestra cultura y nuestra literatura, las de América Latina, han pasado por tres etapas más o menos convulsivas o más o menos fluidas, y que esa experiencia latinoamericana tiene una proyección universal

[...] Yo creo que estas tres cadenas , estos tres circulos a veces tangenciales son la utopía, la epopeya y el mito [...] Hemos vivido bajo el signo de la epopeya casi toda nuestra vida; nuestras novelas han sido épicas y nuestro arte ha sido épico, pero en el momento en que se agota esta capacidad épica, parece que no nos queda sino una posibilidad mítica, una posibilidad de recoger ese pasado, de salir de ese pasado, que es [...] historia mostrenca, para entrar en la dialéctica, que es hacer la historia y hacerla con los mitos que nos han dado los hilos de Ariadna, de todo ese pasado utópico y épico convertido en otra cosa. A través del mito reactuamos el pasado, lo reducimos a proporción humana. Este es el sentido de la deslumbrantes novelas de nuestro gran clásico moderno Alejo Carpentier (132-3).

History is frozen. History has been transformed into a Statue of History, a history that cannot go beyond its self-reflection, a history unable to progress any further. There is no historical progression, this is what in a way the [new] novel is saying: there is no eschatology, there

is only a perpetual present tense. There is only the repetition of ceremonies (126).

I am very much interested in the mythical zone and when I speak of a sacred zone, of course, I am establishing a territory, a secluded area. It is the most ancient notion of the temple, the temple as a defense against the plague, against the siege [...]; it is the *where*: the locus of everything [imaginable], the site of all myths. It seems to me that our Latin American culture and literature have gone through three rather convulsive or fluid stages with a universal projection [...] I believe these three segments, these sometimes tangential three circles are the utopia, the epic and the myth [...] We have lived under the sign of the epic almost all of our lives; our novels have been epic, our art has been epic, but at present when this epic capacity is exhausted it seems we are only left with a mythic possibility, a possibility of [...] exiting that past --which is no more than a history no one wants to be responsible for-- in order to enter into dialectics, which is to make history

with the myths given to us by the threads made by Ariadne from that utopian and epic past and turn it into *something other*. By means of myth we again act out the past, we reduce it to human proportion (132-3).

Fuentes clearly expands the notion of a "frozen history" to the writings of all his "boom" contemporaries. In effect, he is saying Latin American societies have no capacity to renovate themselves; they simply reproduce colonial cycles as in mythic rituals; therefore they have no history. We find here the gravitation of a set of influential works of that period --Dependency Theory, Mircea Eliade's work on the relation between religion and myth, and the studies of mythic archetypes by Erich Neumann, a disciple of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

In a neo-Marxist prolongation of V.I. Lenin's concept of imperialism, Latin American dependency theorists attacked the conceptions of capitalist socio-economic development prevailing since the 19th century, which identified countries as either developed or underdeveloped. Development was usually defined according to the standards of the most advanced capitalist countries in a highly interconnected world trade that supposedly allowed for an

efficient transfer of capitals, technology, personnel and administrative systems. To achieve comparable standards, underdeveloped countries were supposed to maximize their connection to advanced capitalist countries and adopt policies imitating the history of their evolution (Chilcote and Edelstein). Dependency theorists turned this logic around and posed it is precisely these connections that cause underdevelopment. They pointed out that at present the most ruined areas of Latin America were precisely those most connected (Frank).

Dependency theorists defined as dependent those societies whose dynamics of change at the economic, social, political and ideological levels do not respond to social needs nationally defined, but to the influences and impositions of foreign powers who, in alliance or connivance with native power brokers, have included those societies in their military, diplomatic, and economic sphere of influence. Structurally, these terms had prevailed in Latin America ever since the European conquest in the 16th century and the imposition of Mercantilism. The independence from Spain and Portugal during the 19th century was just the inauguration of another cycle of dependency, now under the vaster world connections of English Free Trade. Although the import-substitution industrialization

initiated in the 1930s gave rise to a limited, national capitalism, American multinational corporations came to control in most countries the more important and dynamic economic areas --production of raw materials, food, and mining. Partisans of both the development of a national capitalism and of revolutionary socialism supported the Dependency Theory conception that the essence of Latin American history is flawed. Theology of Liberation also relied on Dependency Theory for social analysis and its conception of "structures of sin."

Using Mircea Eliade, "boom" novelists turned the idea of dependency cycles into a religious satire of Latin American history. Eliade described religion as the periodic, ceremonial return to a mythic incident in the remote past that explains the origin of the universe. At the moment of creation by the gods and/or super-heroes, the universe was at its peak of vitality. This is the sacred time, the true time, eternally preserved in a narration that shows the intent of the gods in creating the universe. Whatever human beings may do in the present tense only reproduces the creative actions of the gods. Individual identities do not exist. Individuals are nothing more than masks that perform the primordial behavior patterns, even in the minutest details of everyday life.

Time gradually exhausts the primordial vitality and the universe decays. Yet life can be re-invigorated in, and disseminated from special places, sacred zones where the vitality of the gods can again be found. Time, therefore, has a dual, circular dimension. Vertically, it is polarized between the degrading, corrupting dynamics and incidents of the profane, secular everyday life, and the superior, sacred dimension, eternally vital and fixed in myths. By means of rituals performed in the seclusion of the sacred zones humans can re-actualize the sacred. Priest-like figures, expert in the secrets and teachings of the mythic narrative, conduct these regenerative rituals and then allow the acolytes to return to their daily lives, until another renewal ceremony is required.

The "boom" satire of history focuses on the oligarchies emerging in each cycle of dependency. The Iberian conquerors of America are the gods, semi-gods or supernatural heroes that set the immovable, mythic, colonial pattern reproduced ever since. In *Las buenas conciencias (The good consciences)* (1959), *Aura* (1960) by Carlos Fuentes, *El astillero (The Shipyard)* (1961), by Juan Carlos Onetti, *La ciudad y los perros (Time of the Hero)* (1963) by Mario Vargas Llosa, *Este domingo (This Sunday)* (1966), by José Donoso, colonialism is reproduced in

decadent, dark oligarchic mansions, animalistic military schools run by corrupted officers, dilapidated export commerce sites. They are shown as the realm of death. Feudal-like lords and their offspring, their peasant serfs, and the aspiring middle classes escalate the State bureaucracy to conserve or position themselves in the mythic hierarchy, especially the young. For this they must cynically betray options of personal freedom. The grip of this existential gridlock is so intense that their personalities are interchangeable, mere functional items in the social order. This is basis of the *doppelgänger*, one of the most characteristic metaphorical contrivances of the "boom" writers.

Submission to the oligarchic order is subliminally conditioned by a collective unconscious, which makes evident the surrealist affiliation of the "boom narrative." Jungian psychoanalysis contributed the notion of collective unconscious and a large archive of fundamental metaphors (Neumann). Jungians describe the collective unconscious as the deepest level of the psyche and the reservoir of all mental and physical experience since the oldest organic antecedents in humanity's evolution. These experiences are preserved as virtual representational patterns called archetypes. The mind projects them onto the environment as

particular shapes, forms, emotions, and ideational contents to respond to existential choices and predicaments, both individual and collective. The projections contain traces of the dialectic confrontation of the most instinctive archetypes that tend to drag humans back to their animalistic origin, and those archetypes that have differentiated the species as the builder of history, in other words, of ever-changing behavior, institutions and civilizations. This confrontation is an important dramatic element in the "boom" novels.

Historical transformation is represented by the archetype of the epic hero who rises in a struggle against all the monstrous beings nature may hold and nurture in the dark, fathomless abyss of the collective unconscious. The most threatening monsters reside at home, in the family -- the "horrible/terrible mother", the "horrible/terrible father". In the infancy of the emerging epic hero the parents exhibit their nurturing protective image. As his self-awareness, strength, will, assertiveness, wisdom, planning capacity grow, the hero becomes a subversive in the eyes of the caring, protective parents. The parents now appear as sinister figures who conspire to deny the hero whatever meaning and significance his existence may ever have. Home becomes a labyrinth where these monsters lie in

ambush, exhibiting their fascinating, confusing, enslaving aura.

Some "boom" novels emphasize the horrible aspect of the collective unconscious. In *Pedro Páramo* (1955) by Juan Rulfo, Juan Preciado goes to Comala to face the father he did not know, Pedro Páramo. Contrary to the notion that returning to the origins invigorates life, the son finds his father had become a demonic deity. Juan is devoured by the anal principles Páramo instilled in nature and human relations to make them radically infertile. In *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), by Carlos Fuentes, the complexity of the narrative mode obscures that the actions of the attractive, romantic hero, a prominent revolutionary, in fact respond to the motivations of the Menchaca family, whose collective class unconscious had been set during the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Artemio Cruz was a front-man for foreign corporations, betraying the nationalist ideals of the Mexican revolution. In *Aura* (1962), also by Fuentes, Felipe Montero, a young historian is hired by Consuelo --a very old woman of indefinite age-- to organize the papers of general Llorente. In the darkness of her mansion and her necromantic rituals, Montero discovers he is really a transmigration of the soul of general Llorente, Consuelo's husband, who in the 19th century had been a Mexican

supporter of the emperor Maximilian, an Austrian imposed on Mexico by France. Again they consummate their love. In *Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)* (1967), by Gabriel García Márquez, after six generations, Aureliano Babilonia, one of the last members of the incestuous Buendía family, discovers that, in a circular time-frame, the destiny of the Buendías had been set in a cryptic text written by Melquíades, a gypsy who, as a mock free-trader, used to import quaint novelty items into Macondo, the city of mirrors.

In *El lugar sin límites (Hell Without Limits)* (1967) by José Donoso, an understanding of the Chilean national identity at a moment of modernization in the 1960s is explored from the site of a cheap whorehouse in Estación El Olivo, a small town deep in latifundia territory. The whorehouse reveals the omnipotence of don Alejo Cruz, senator for the area, iconic figure of the feudalistic oligarchy originated with the Spanish conquest. His power is irreducible to sociological factors. He is a god-like father archetype who instills a strange awe and fascination among the population; like a faun, perhaps don Alejo was the procreator of innumerable bastards in the area, in the manner of the conquistadors. Modernization is incarnated by characters of the emerging low middle classes, like the

trucker Pancho Vega, who shows some degree of entrepreneurship and autonomy. Yet he feels compelled to return again and again to El Olivo to be humiliated and overwhelmed by don Alejo's charisma. Japonesa and her daughter Japonesita, owners of the whorehouse, believe the integration of Estación El Olivo into the national electricity grid will increase the prestige and volume of their business. Don Alejo, though, close to death, has decided to let the town die. The Chilean character would never surmount its bondage to the colonial collective unconscious. There is a whiff of *Pedro Páramo* in Donoso's novel.

The magnitude of the "boom" writers' skepticism about Latin American history can be gauged contrasting the sense of the cluster of novels just reviewed with Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*) (1953). Together with Jorge Luis Borges, Carpentier is recognized as an antecedent of the "boom narrative." A communist and a surrealist, Carpentier conceived, wrote and published *Los pasos perdidos* before the Cuban revolution initiated in 1959. The Cuban export of the revolution to the rest of Latin America could not yet be imagined in its impact. Whatever Carpentier could have attempted in surrealist terms to give a poetic account of the central issues

propelled by imperialism in contemporary Latin America needed to be brought closer to actual history, which is what the "boom" novelists did.

In *Los pasos perdidos* Latin America appears as a territory *meant* to be conquered, not responding to the socio-economic imperatives of the world system, but to the conflicting/complementary, universal dialectic of psychoanalytic masculine and feminine principles. An unnamed composer and musicologist, the hero of the narrative, incarnates the masculine principle. His vitality appears severely weakened, a reflex of European civilization as represented by New York –he is aggrieved by a loveless marriage, a humdrum affair with Mouche (= the Fly), a woman of undefined sexuality, a suggestion of strange sodomy with an insect; his creativity is exhausted, he witnesses how the notion of existential choices has been reduced to parlor games played by intellectuals affected by the same emptiness and spiritual degeneration he is experiencing.

The commission to go deep into the Amazonian jungle to research primitive musical instruments for a museum gives the composer the opportunity to return to the origins not only of the professional core choice of his life, but also of one of humanity's most fundamental awarenesses, that of

sound, and music as an attempt to organize the chaos of noise into harmony. His voyage down the Amazonian river is a metaphor of descent into the collective unconscious. Rosario, a native woman, restores the composer's feeling for the authentic feminine principle; Yannes, a Greek merchant, reprises the archetype of Odysseus; in Santa Mónica de los Venados, father Pedro de Henestrosa, and the Adelantado, reprise the monumental archetype of civilization being founded as an outpost in the jungle. Here the composer's creativity is re-ignited, ironically, with no audience for his *opera magna*. Nicasio, a leper, interrupts this idyll by raping an eight-year old girl. The leper's crime is one more dimension of the life instinct that must be disciplined by civilization. The composer --a paragon of civilization-- is expected to execute the criminal but fails. Marcos, son of the Adelantado, completes the task. Significantly, a few days later an airplane arrives to extract the composer. He finds he is a celebrity in New York, is divorced by his wife, and rejected by Mouche. Recovering the idyll of Santa María de los Venados and the love of Rosario proves to be impossible --the rain and the high waters wash away the marking the composer had left in the river to find the return passageway. From Yannes, later on he finds out Rosario had

married Marcos and is pregnant. Indeed, nobody ever believed the composer belonged in that environment or really wanted to stay there, least of all Rosario.

Los pasos perdidos exposes a highly abstract, universalist conception of human archetypes and existence, perhaps a cliché —the dilemmas of “modern man and civilization.” The “boom” writers were much more specific — their issue was the sense of Latin American history at a moment when the Cuban revolution demanded that intellectuals make radical political and ideological choices.

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