

LOS PASOS PERDIDOS AS LOST WORLD FICTION

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RESUMEN

El narrador de *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) de Carpentier, ha intrigado y confundido académicos y críticos desde al menos inicios de 1970 cuando Roberto González Echevarría señaló lo que caracterizó como una disonancia en la voz narrativa de la novela. El presente análisis desafía las interpretaciones autobiográficas primarias de la novela que han surgido en los últimos años, favoreciendo en cambio por una voz narrativa paródica que sin saberlo se apropia, entre otras tradiciones, el popular género de ficción de mundo perdido.

Palabras clave: Carpentier- Alejo, narrador desconfiable, ficción de mundo perdido, literatura de viajes, turismo.

ABSTRACT

The narrator of Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) has intrigued and confounded scholars and critics since at least the early 1970s, when Roberto González Echevarría pointed to what he characterized as a dissonance in the novel's narrative voice. The present analysis challenges primarily autobiographical interpretations of the novel which have emerged in recent years, arguing instead for a parodic narrative voice that unwittingly appropriates, among other traditions, the popular genre of lost world fiction.

Key words: Carpentier- Alejo, unreliable narrator, lost world fiction, travel literature, tourism.

The anonymous narrator of Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* fills his account with an almost impossibly broad and variegated array of cultural and literary references. Stephen Gingerich (2001) points out that the "ruminations" of the *Pasos* narrator entail "a familiarity with the history of literature, music, and plastic arts going back through the Middle Ages to the Greeks and the Paleolithic" (2001: 230). Gingerich lists only a few of the influences

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Recepción: 09- 11- 2011
Aceptación: 13- 12- 2011

invoked: Pythagoreanism, the Cabala, Tibetan tantras, Heidegger, Mallarmé, Ecclesiastes. Numerous others could be added, including such luminaries as Homer, Mozart, Beethoven, and such disciplines as anthropology, history, and various sciences.

While the numerous overt references of the pastiche evoke elite cultural elements, the narrative, in its structure and in many of its themes, actually derives from mostly unnamed forms and sources in popular culture. The most important of these is the genre often called “lost world fiction”. By this term I refer to a popular literary genre that has a considerable history going at least as far back as Lucian of Samosata. In such narratives, the discovery of the lost world confers on the discoverer a privileged access to the recondite and the marvelous. The adventure consists of seeking, finding, visiting, and returning to tell the tale. The sojourn in the lost world is an ordeal that constitutes a mystical threshold. The quest and the return are a rite of passage that yields special knowledge of which the traveler is custodian. This wisdom may take the form of a progressive understanding of the workings of the greater world (as with Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle), or it may provide a vantage point from which to enunciate a cautionary insight into the human condition (as in the case of Kipling and Lovecraft).

Lost world fiction articulates with travel literature, both fictional and non-fictional. The attraction of lost worlds became a factor in popular culture in the nineteenth century. It arose largely due to the appeal of the accounts of archaeologists who discovered and described such sites as Mayan ruins, Assyrian and Egyptian cities, and the temple complex of Angkor Wat. Travelers who visited secluded or isolated places like Mecca or Lhasa contributed to the popularization of exotically inaccessible locales that served as the model for imaginary peoples and societies in fictional narratives (Becker 1992: 23-28). As Bradley Deane has noted, the lost world genre is necessarily paradoxical, both glorifying and deploring primitivism and savagery, and expressive, either explicitly or implicitly, of a deep-seated malaise regarding modernity, especially in its hegemonic manifestations. This kind of fiction advances the notion of a “transvaluation of savagery” (2008: 220). The savage and the primitive are frightening and potentially destructive. But they enjoy as well a special status: that of the human being unspoiled or unaffected by the wickedness and snares of the modern world. The adventure of *Pasos* is presented by the narrator as a true life experience to be interpreted in serious terms, terms that suggest both the weighty issues of cultural history and the respectability of culture in the aesthetic sense. In the latter dimension, the narrator’s high-cultural references co-exist, apparently inadvertently, with many typical episodes and themes of the mostly pop-cultural genre of lost world fiction. The parallels between his narration and this fictional genre are not explicitly recognized.

Eduardo González postulates that *Pasos* represents Carpentier’s “departure from his previous work as a storyteller” (1986: 424). Earlier work shows the “extravagant detachment” of a “comedian who always remained absconded in his grand style”. “Erudite” and “arcane”, Carpentier is always “at the brink of self parody”. The learning with which he invests his writings is “burdened by encyclopedism”, “flawed with its own brilliance”. For that earlier Carpentier, in the style of “great modernists” like Mann or Eliot, “myth achieves form only in being defaced and displaced”, and is unattainable for both the individual and his “culture and history”. While I would argue that these descriptions could be aptly applied to *Pasos* as well, González contends that *Pasos* represents Carpentier’s “first moment of manifest self-scrutiny” (1986: 425). According to this reading, the “numerous acts of personal evasion”, the multiple “avowed instances of enlightenment”, reflect a transformation in Carpentier. This interpretation

oblige us to see the protagonist's incessant "celebrations of culture", and the "stereotypes of doom" which fill the final chapters, as revelations of a personal crisis of the author. The narrator's "disarming misogyny" and other "forms of self-hatred", asserts González, must be interpreted while deciding which elements "escape undamaged the accretions of rhetoric or the self-blinding effects of *mauvaise foi*" (González 1986: 425).

Roberto González Echevarría, notes González, was the first to characterize the "dissonance in the narrative voice" of *Pasos* (González 1986: 426; referring to González Echevarría 1971). On the one hand, the reader detects a purposeful narrative voice. On the other, there is a constant "ironic commentary which the narrator's actions and evasions weave around him as testimony of his failure". The plot unfolds as a kind of "new coming of age", as "a paradise-all-too-briefly but memorably regained", backgrounded by "a disruptive string of failures" that reduces the narrator's possibly deluded memories into "the finer grain of inner confession", resulting in a "baroque fugue echoed as a demonic set of variations on the theme of self-deflation". Fading into "romantic irony" as picaresque erudition is "made wiser by *desengaño*" (González 1986: 426) the marvelous realism of *Pasos* situates the narrative in a tradition of "self-invention and refashioning" exemplified by Saint Augustine and Rousseau on the one hand, Lazarillo de Tormes and Marcel Proust on the other (González 1986: 427). *Pasos*, concludes González, must be read as an autobiographical novel. In support of this interpretation he cites González Echevarría's introduction to his edition of the work:

En la mejor tradición de las confesiones, el texto traiciona a cada paso a su autor, que pretende desvelar verdades sobre sí, pero que sólo lo logra indirectamente; esta traición del texto también revela, a un nivel biográfico, un amargo autodesprecio que es también típico de las confesiones, y que manifiesta hasta qué punto esta novela es importante para entender a Carpentier. En esta lacerante sinceridad radica el gran éxito de *Los pasos perdidos* como obra literaria. (González Echevarría 1985: 48; cited by González 1986: 426)

I cite González (1986) at some length because he masterfully encapsulates a certain reading of *Pasos* that is shared by a number of other scholars and critics. That reading posits that, because many of the characters, settings, and events of the narrative have analogs in the personal life of the author, *Pasos* must be read as fictionalized autobiography.

Many, perhaps most, of Carpentier's readers agree with González in his view of *Pasos* as the "first moment of manifest self-scrutiny" in the author's career. However, to see the novel's complexities primarily in terms of supposed autobiographical revelations is to assume an impossible burden of proof. New Criticism's founding theoreticians, seeking to escape the tyranny of source and influence criticism, specifically point out the limitations of authorial biography as an indicator of literary meaning (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954: 7). This is not to say that the intention of an utterance or a text is irrelevant or unrecoverable; only that authorial intention is unverifiable. All critics since who assume the autonomy of the work, participate to one degree or another in this approach.

In his critical writings and journalism, Carpentier may have worked out the problems of the nature of art, the separateness of cultural spheres, and the possible autonomy of Latin American literature and culture (Gingerich 2001: 233-236). However, we must avoid the hermeneutical fallacy of associating the author's intellectual deliberations, as reconstructed from his essays, articles, and interviews, with the *Pasos* narrator's crisis of conscience. The narrator, argues Gingerich (2001: 237), "both is and is not Carpentier". I would argue that the work is not something drastically new in which one detects the "ghostly residues" of the author's earlier work perceived by González (425), but rather that *Pasos* represents a culmination rather than a departure in the Carpentier's narrative evolution.

The *Pasos* narrator, in his desperate attempt to authenticate himself, construes a scenario that relies extensively on stereotypes from travel and adventure literature. Numerous clues in the text suggest that the parallels with such literature are unwitting. The last thing in this self-important raconteur would want his readers to detect is anything approaching fraudulence or frivolity. He wants the reader to see his ordeal and the wisdom he gains from it as creditable and meritorious. The mimicry is ironic, in the sense that we see what the narrator does not. In this, Carpentier follows Lucian, Thomas More, and Swift. *Gulliver's Travels*, in its formal presentation, is a parody of travel literature of the day, especially with regard to its often perfervid, delusional, or duplicitous narrators, and the preferred theme of lost worlds and civilizations.

Just as in the case of Swift, whose irony is a calculated rhetorical effect deducible from clues in the text, the irony of *Pasos* is something the reader is supposed to figure out. It is not Carpentier who obliquely invokes this genre, but rather the unreliable character he creates. The narrator's tacit reliance on travel themes is, along with the cultural name-dropping, a self-aggrandizing but unwittingly revealing strategy. Any resemblance between his character's life, times, and travels, and those of Carpentier himself, is due to the author's drawing on his personal life as a stock of settings, incidents and personages that serve as paraphrasable elements in the confection of his protagonist's narration of supposed encounters and vicissitudes. Whatever incidental parallels may be deduced from a study of the author's life, or from what he may have said in interviews, Carpentier is not the narrator. *Pasos* is not his fictionalized memoir. If we wish to understand *Pasos* as a novel, we must focus on the artistry rather than on the artist. The narrator is a confection, a persona whose fallibilities are those of an ordinary man who wishes to seem extraordinary, a commonplace traveler who crafts his account to make it seem larger-than-life.

Fernando Alegría (1976: 122-123) points out the parallels between *Pasos* and the ample narrative and folkloric tradition of searches for El Dorado and other idealized mythical kingdoms. For some readers, *Pasos* constitutes an allegory of Latin American culture and identity. The protagonist's encounters with anachronisms and chronological gaps parallel the searches and encounters of Latin American historical and cultural reality. Citing Fanon's *Toward the African Revolution*, Leonardo Acosta, for example, points out the frequency with which the *prise de conscience* of the colonized person resisting the oppressor's culture is expressed by a journey to the primordial roots of the pre-colonial culture (2004: 98).

Alegría interprets the parallel between travel and lost world narratives in terms of the narrator's pathetic discovery that promised lands are not recoverable, that while thinking to momentarily abandon his Eden he has lost it irrevocably. The miraculous place can only exist at the instant of its possession. The traveler's forlorn attempt to return is compared to Conway's attempt, in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, to return to the hidden city, to escape the disorder and contamination of modernity. Rosalba Campra also compares *Pasos* to Hilton's novel. Pointing out the common theme of edenic spaces, she notes such other generic analogues as H. Rider Haggard's *She*, Mujica Láinez's *De milagros y melancolías*, Julio Torres's *El oro de los césares*, and the lost civilizations of the Indiana Jones films. She emphasizes the melding of adventure themes with the "arquetipo del lugar inaccesible donde se custodia un tesoro y un saber arcanos" (2008: 136).

Other narratives centering on the discovery of lost worlds, races, and civilizations include Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*,

Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, and H. P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Shadow out of Time*. Despite their many differences, all these works share the notion of a discovered space, secluded or protected, a vestigial reality left over from previous phases of cultural evolution, of civilization, of racial consciousness. Lost world narratives represent the discovered space from various perspectives. They have in common a representation of characters who suffer and sacrifice in ways that entitle them to be taken seriously as witnesses. The story may be about ineffable loss and the poignant impossibility of rediscovering the miraculously attained refuge (e.g., *Lost Horizon*). Another variant depicts the refuge as a precarious ecology, access to which is reserved for the privileged and protective few who have found their way to it (e.g., Conan Doyle 1912). Yet another manifestation tells of apocalyptic revelations, made possible by the compulsive questing of an anguished explorer (as in Lovecraft).

González Echevarría mentions Conan Doyle's *Lost World* as an especially significant parallel. Conan Doyle's novel typifies the "prevalence of journeys" in nineteenth-century popular fiction, a kind of fiction that has "invaded" film and television. Conan Doyle's tale takes its narrator and his companions to an isolated plateau in the South American wilderness. The isolation of the enclosed locale insures that "plant and animal life have been kept outside of the evolutionary process". The travelers' probe into "the uncharted regions of the colonial world" transforms the "perception of nature" into a "literary topic" (González Echevarría 1998: 105).

Conan Doyle's narrative, among numerous others, is certainly one of the lost world narratives subliminally intruding on the narrator's story-telling decisions. However, there are important differences between Conan Doyle's influential novel and the *Pasos* narrator's account of his journey into primeval South America. Notable is Conan Doyle's pointed exclusion of women from the journey, and his mordant satire of amorous gallantry. Malone, Conan Doyle's narrator and protagonist, sallies forth in search of adventure challenged by his beloved Gladys—his Dulcinea—to be "a man of great deeds and strange experiences" (Conan 1912: 7). Returning from his fabulous expedition and finding his beloved married to a mere solicitor, Malone reacts with "grief and rage and laughter" at the woman's empty-headedness and his own credulity (Conan 1912: 307).

The Lost World is, in effect, Edwardian imperial fiction. The prehistoric ecology of the place serves as a story-scape in which to play out, in escapist-fictional terms, a sexist and racist scenario all too reminiscent of innumerable episodes of colonial history. The practical leader of the expedition is an adventurer and big-game hunter, Lord John Roxton. He returns to South America after some years' absence, having once played the role of white savior to native victims of slave traders. The first description of the character is suggestive: "Something there was of Napoleon III, something of Don Quixote" (Conan 1912: 76-77). Summarizing his one-man campaign against "Peruvian slave-drivers", he characterizes himself as "the flail of the Lord up in those parts" (Conan 1912: 81). With respect to another aspect of the colonial encounter, played down by the *Pasos* narrator, see Michael Harney's analysis (2008: 66) of *The Lost World's* account of its heroes' intervention in a war between "good" and "bad" natives. The good natives are of an evolutionary and cultural level "considerably higher [...] than many South American tribes" (Conan 1912: 241). The victory of these superior natives over their subhuman enemies is justified as a Darwinian resolution of age-old feuds, as the "man-beast" is ever after relegated to "his allotted place" (Conan 1912: 256).

Carpentier's narrator avoids such overtly hegemonic imperialism. But he borrows, to some degree, hegemonic snippets of Conan Doyle's tale: his readiness to seek and find the pristinely isolated enclave; the white man's pious advocacy of politically correct natives; the

colonialist's implicit favoritisms and antipathies; Eurocentric chronologies and agendas. A crucial element in *Pasos* is thus the notion of nested historical contexts. The novel, observes Acosta (2004), assumes the context of the recent or contemporary paleolithic. Together with *mestizaje* and cultural fusion, this leads to cultural syncretism as a paradoxical manifestation of identity. The narrator thus seems to assume the possibility of cultural symbiosis, in the context of universal timelines, of anachronistic survivals, of vestigial beliefs and ways of life, coexisting with contemporary worlds. Such survivals may exist due to oral tradition; they may be seen as constituting a primordial and essential Latin America (Acosta 2004: 94). The *Pasos* narrator seeks something beyond bourgeois modernity. Hence the prestige, for him, of the age-old archaic or primitive cultures of Asia, Africa, Oceania, or Latin America. Carpentier himself, argues Acosta, eschews notions of pure folklore, pristine savagery, or primitive purity. There is no question, in his intellectual profile, of belief in a Rousseauvian noble savage. Acosta rightly emphasizes the author's notion of the "presencia fáustica del indio o del negro", of the possibility of "fecundos mestizajes" (Acosta 2004: 96).

However, the *Pasos* narrator's perception of racial and tribal differences is muddled. On the one hand, he encounters some villagers whom he describes as true primitives, innocent of modernity's complexities and conflicts. On the other, he seeks to go native within the utopic-anarchic community of Santa Mónica de los Venados. Implicitly invoking a conventional theme of adventure fiction that had been pointedly disallowed by Conan Doyle, the *Pasos* narrator, furthermore, channels his experience through his relationship with a quasi-mythical personage, the native princess in his scenario. His Medea, his Ariadne, his doña Marina, is the mestiza Rosario: "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 las sólida redondez de los hombros y una peculiar anchura de la cadera" (Carpentier 1985: 147). For the narrator, this "viviente suma de razas" (Carpentier 1985: 147) represents the possibility that "ciertas amalgamas de razas menores [...] eran muy preferibles a los formidables encuentros habidos en los grandes lugares de reunión de América, entre celtas, negros, latinos, indios y hasta 'cristianos nuevos' en la primera hora" (Carpentier 1985: 147).

The narrator mingles concepts of barbarism, savagery, and primitivism. These, he seems to be telling us, are best understood as arrays of techniques, bodies of knowledge, to be contrasted with the analogous arrays of civilization. At the same time, the narrator allows, one must see the absurdity of the concept of the savage. It is a term designed to control and oppress, to conjure, as Acosta aptly summarizes the narrator's perspective on this issue, an illusory mythology of ethnocentric domination (Acosta 106). All setbacks and disappointments can thus be represented as rites of passage undergone by the traveler, legitimating, at the end, the narrator's epiphanic fatalism regarding the impossibility of return to the primitive and the unattainability of Paradise (Acosta 2004: 110).

The lost world is to adventure fiction what the *locus amoenus* is to the pastoral: an amniotic zone walled off from outside influences. The *Pasos* narrator invokes this aspect of lost world narrative, the pristine isolation of the regions attained during his journey, an isolation that reveals to him

[...] el descubrimiento de que aún quedaban inmensos territorios en el mundo cuyos habitantes vivían ajenos a las fiebres del día, y que aquí [...] pervivía en ellos un cierto animismo, una conciencia de muy viejas tradiciones, un recuerdo vivo de ciertos mitos que eran, en suma, presencia de una cultura más honrada y válida, probablemente, que la que se nos había quedado *allá*. (Carpentier 1985: 187)

The hinterland visited by the narrator represents a reality opposite to the teeming modernity from which he finds himself alienated. He represents this journey, Gingerich observes, as a “a descent through the ages, back through the colonial period of the Americas and the European Middle Ages, to the inception of human communities”. The primitive world is one defined by a harmonious relationship with the environment: “En torno mío cada cual estaba entregado a las ocupaciones que le fueran propias, en un apacible concierto de tareas, que eran las de una vida sometida a los ritmos primordiales”. Within their environment, “absolutamente dueños de su cultura”, these beings are anything but savage or primitive. The human being in such circumstances is “maestro en la totalidad de oficios propiciados por el teatro de su existencia” (Carpentier 1985: 234; cited by Gingerich 2001: 230-231).

For James Pancrazio, *Pasos* represents the “allure of a pure state uncorrupted by civilization”. Its narration seems to appeal to a “yearning for the recovery of a lost space and a mythical journey toward the recovery of an authentic self” (Pancrazio 2004). Pancrazio interprets this mystical journey in basically Freudian terms, i.e., those of a “disavowal of maternal lack”, resulting in a “père-version” and a “turning away from the paternal metaphor”. The fetishist logic of the story is a “wild card” concealing deprivation behind a façade of excess in short, the “pleasurable illusion” of “having one’s cake and eating it, too”. The narrator’s anxiety is prompted by dread of symbolic castration, exacerbated by his perception of his life as “an unauthentic, theatrical representation”, his adherence to an “oppressive routine as if he were a mechanized part of a larger machine”, his living a “ritualized existence” (Pancrazio 2004: 205). The novel thus represents a “demonization of the city, the market and cosmopolitan space” (Pancrazio 2004: 206). Mouche, even if she is not the stereotypical femme fatale luring the protagonist to his death, nonetheless reflects the narrator’s “fragile masculinity” (Pancrazio 2004: 206). The journey into the South American jungle represents not only a temporal regression, but also “a backward movement in a long series of fetishes” (Pancrazio 2004: 213). Each successive link gives way to a subsequent link: Ruth yields to Mouche; Mouche to Rosario. The latter becomes “the phallic mother, the archetype of Woman as Earth”, asserting “a limitless creative and regenerative potential”. The journey to the heart of the wilderness, peeling away “one fetish after another”, takes the narrator to the Primordial Mother of all religions (Pancrazio 2004: 214).

Such Freudian approaches may help us map out the narrator’s obsessions (see also Millington). But we must, at the same time, consider the possibility that the analysand –which is to say, the analysand-narrator created by the novelist– speaks in bad faith, or renders an account that is simply inaccurate. The psychological tropes one discovers in the course of his narrative are themselves part of the same thematic baggage he takes wherever he goes. The total trajectory of his experience is the thing he wishes to share with us, on his terms. Rosman (2003) observes the frequency with which Latin American literature and criticism tend to “thematize the question of travel”, and to discover in narratives of conquest and colonization a precedent for a narrative of “performative dilemmas” and “quests for identity” (Rosman 2003: 30-31). At first it seems that *Pasos* represents the narrator’s journey as the discovery of a “primordial Latin America imbued with an authenticity he no longer finds in his own world”. The novel thus appears to see Latin America as “a pure and utopic place out of time”, immune to Old World decadence, immorality, and atrocity, and to North American artificiality and mechanization. What seems at first to be a journey back to historical and cultural sources is in fact undermined by the highly mediated nature of the travel diary that

frames the supposed discovery (Rosman 2003: 33). Citing González Echaverría (1977: 154), she summarizes a prevalent reading of the narrator's dilemma: "Writing [...] stands in the way of his unmediated access to what is natural, immediate, and true". This inevitable lack of immediacy is, indeed, "the destiny as well as the defeat of the modern artist" (Rosman 2003: 34). Because the narrator cannot literally identify the path "that will allow his entry to the origin", he cannot become "the Adamic hero/writer" (Rosman 2003: 34-35).

The narrator hints that his journey is Odyssean. The Homeric reference is overt, maintains Rosman: the Greek miner Yannes gives him a copy of the *Odyssey*; the narrator intends to compose a threnody based on the epic text. He sees the trials he endures during his journey as epic tests of his manhood. These ordeals will lead him to a true homecoming, in that he will discover a more authentic way of life to replace the modern, inauthentic existence he seeks to escape (Rosman 2003: 36). The intended marriage to Rosario is more than merely an act of going native. It represents a "domestication of the woman" that will, like Odysseus' claim on Penelope, ensure "the propriety and property of the home". Rosario, in effect, will, like Penelope, authenticate the new home that defines and justifies the journey. The narrator chronically confuses discovery and foundation, the primordial acts of the colonizer. He fails to understand the significance of Rosario's refusal to cooperate with his domesticating fantasy (2003: 37). In choosing as his defining inspiration a peripatetic text, a tale of wandering and deferred homecoming, the narrator commits himself to "unending travel" (2003: 45).

The narrator tells us of the "obscure affinity" felt by Yannes, the Greek miner, for the adventures for Odysseus, "visitador de países portentosos, nada enemigo del oro, capaz de ignorar a las sirenas por no perder su hacienda de Itaca" (Carpentier 1985: 214). This casual interpretation of Homer reveals more about the conflicting motives of the narrator than about Homeric intentions in the novel. The narrator attributes to the epic hero the same bourgeois materialism that clouds his own conflicting perceptions of personal identity, ethical engagement, and creative commitment. However, the travels and travails of the Homeric Odysseus are largely compulsory, occasioned by war and aggravated by ill luck and divine intervention. The narrator's itineration, by contrast, is entirely voluntary and discretionary. His motives are compulsive rather than compulsory. The greed attributed to Odysseus is framed by the world of siege warfare. Opportunistic and piratical, Odysseus covets loot as much for distribution among his followers as for his own personal enrichment. Disregarding the hero's curiosity, the narrator fails to see that Homer's wanderer has his own compulsive side. Odysseus does not in fact ignore the sirens; rather he has his men tie him to the mast so that he may listen to their song with impunity. And to assume that Odysseus yearns for home merely to avoid losing his estate ignores the hero's love for his wife, his kin, his subjects—in short, it ignores why the hero spurns Calypso's offer of immortality. Odysseus is homesick. The *Pasos* narrator does not seem to understand this.

Djelal Kadir (1986) has argued that Latin American literature favors the romance as a form. It tends to narrate in terms of "a quest for beginnings", a tracing of "illusionary history and chronicles of utopic pursuits" (Kadir 1986: 3). The journey will tend to be a "self-conscious, problematic itinerary", a narratization of the "eschatological visions" of a Columbus or the "chivalric chimeras of the Conquistadors" (Kadir 1986: 4). The "self-contradictory history of origins" gives rise to a narrative of "tortuous and insurmountable byways", a pilgrimage that prolongs itself "through the thwarting of its own arrival" at an "ever-deferred destination". Evoking the Sisyphian imagery also highlighted by the *Pasos* narrator, Kadir summarizes the

effect of this prolongation: “the quest becomes forever extended and the destination rendered perpetually abeyant” (Kadir 1986: 5).

The narrator presents his lost world in just such terms: as a shifting, elusive reality that, even if once attained, must ever afterwards be seen as beyond reach. The Adelantado’s Santa Mónica de los Venados is, notes Guillermina De Ferrari, a “ciudad ideal”, a “utopía moderna” because it is, paradoxically, isolated from modernity. Resembling the cities founded by such conquerors as Cortés and Pizarro, it seeks to correct past errors. It is designed to protect against two kinds of contamination. One is internal and physical: the danger of leprosy. The other is exterior: the menace of economic, political, and cultural invasion, as represented by gold prospectors (De Ferrari 2002: 221). The exterior hazard is controlled by the town’s geographical isolation from outside influences. But the physical hazard, represented by the leper Nicasio, symbolizes the general danger of contamination; the leper personifies “los temores del contagio” (De Ferrari 2002: 222).

This fixation on presenting himself as a purified revealer of deep truths, a harbinger of dreaded possibilities, inspires the narrator’s vatic self-portrait. He has been there, done that; he is special, unique; he has the reader at a disadvantage. In this he spins an old ethnographic trope, summarized by James Clifford in terms of an ethnography “enmeshed in writing” that presents experience in textual form, betraying, in the process, “multiple subjectivities and political constraints”. Revealing itself through the elaboration of strategies of authority, it proclaims itself to be “the purveyor of truth” (Clifford 1988: 25).

The topical contrast between truth-telling and fiction in ethnographic writing is pointed out by Marianna Torgovnick in her discussion of Lévi-Strauss. The latter anthropologist seeks beginnings “as a key to wisdom we can live by, not as something we must reach in order to exorcise” (Torgovnick 1990: 217). Lévi-Strauss is aware of the irony of the ethnographer’s choice: to reject one’s own society, seeking out alien peoples, bestowing on them a “patience and devotion” denied to one’s own fellow citizens. Lévi-Strauss likewise recognizes the ethical passivity entailed in implicitly relativistic tolerance of all societies as equally viable ways of life (Torgovnick 1990: 218).

It is as if Carpentier pointedly conceives of a narrator who personifies both these aspects of the ethnographer’s persona: the exorcistic and the exoticist. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, however, the narrator, in his ethnographic mode, is unaware of such nuances. His amateur ethnography serves a covert purpose. Essentializing the primordial, the narrator short-changes his own home environment. The inauthenticity of the modern is taken as axiomatic; modern man is disallowed from finding his own rhythm, his own competencies. The narrator instead romanticizes the various natives he encounters. For Gingerich, the futility of the narrator is grounded in his lack of awareness of difference between the art he aspires to create and the tasks imposed by a communal life he sees as conditioned by “the closeness of nature and the simplicity of life” (Gingerich 2001: 231). An art that mimics the supposed pristine simplicity of the pre-modern—that eschews “its own autonomy and becomes one of many customs, tools, and artifacts which are subordinate to the central organizing function of culture”—ceases to be, according to Gingerich, the kind of pursuit that the narrator yearns to engage in (Gingerich 2001: 231).

Seemingly at pains to account for the customs and way of life of the primitive community in which he seeks to go native, the narrator valorizes his briefly adopted community because it affords him a glimpse of lost innocence. It gives him the opportunity to wallow in the pathos of a paradise lost. Indulging in pre-lapsarian fantasy, he portrays Santa Mónica de los

Venados in paradisiacal terms. But this expression of the ethnographic convention does not mean that the narrator actually imagines himself as an ethnographer. That would appear too mundane, too contaminated by mere professionalism. The alleged authenticity of his discovery must transcend mere professional knowledge. The ethnography implicitly practiced by the narrator is but another element in the farrago of bits and pieces borrowed from innumerable sources.

The *Pasos* narrator sees himself in vaguely Conradian terms. At first he attempts to go native in an oblique and perverse way, like Kurtz in his heart of darkness, setting himself up as a god, becoming more native than the native. But the narrator does not see the primitive environment as Conrad's "treasure house of primitivist tropes", to cite Torgovnick's phrase. The latter critic sees Conrad's primitive world as an unstable "mass of parts", a "madhouse", a prehistoric environment with "no proper time of its own" (Torgovnick 1990: 145). In support of her reading, she adduces a famous passage in which Marlow describes himself and his passengers as penetrating "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness", as "wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet". In Conrad (1988), nature is problematic: "we could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil". The indigenous world is likewise equivocally perceived: "prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?". The intruder is out of place; the native world is closed, irrevocably alien: "we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse". Nature and the world of uncivilized men is inscrutable: "we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign— and no memories" (Conrad 1988: 37).

The irony of the narrator's account is that he experiences the pre-modern world in a way similar to that described by Marlow. The primitive realm frightens by its complexity, by its intractable difference from the familiar. In order to impose a reassuring order, the *Pasos* narrator drops names, cites meaningful precedents, attributes transcendent meanings: "[...] he encontrado en todas partes la sollicitación 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" (Carpentier 1985: 268). Enveloped in a referential nimbus of scattered analogies, vaguely recalled excerpts of narrative, scraps of ideas, he tries to play the role of a Marlow. However, another of Conrad's troubled characters also comes to mind. Even more striking than the parallel with Marlow is that between the *Pasos* narrator and Lord Jim.

Taking refuge in Patusan, a remote upriver community where his troubled past can be kept secret, Conrad's protagonist wins the title of "Tuan" (Conrad 1996) by earning the respect of his adopted people, leading them in their resistance against piratical oppressors. The motif in question consists, in its broadest terms, of a welcoming native community's acceptance of an assimilating and salvific outsider. In its more complex forms, the outsider's assimilation is both fostered and symbolized by amorous involvement with a native woman. This element is represented by Jim's relationship with Jewel, a beautiful woman of mixed race, the daughter of a Portuguese trader and a native woman. Marlow notes "the even, olive pallor of her complexion", the "blue-black gleams of her hair" (Conrad 1996: 168). Conrad's Marlow emphasizes the symbiotic intensity of Jim's involvement with his adopted world, as he describes the "strange uneasy romance" between Jewel and her beloved, her possessive yet protective attitude toward him, the complicity of community and environment: "The land, the

people, the forests were her accomplices, guarding him with vigilant accord, with an air of seclusion, of mystery, of invincible possession” (Conrad 1996: 169).

However, analogies with this Conradian scenario become destabilized as we compare the outcome of the *Pasos* narrator’s sojourn among pre-modern folk and the fate of Conrad’s protagonist. Recognizing his guilt for the death of the chief’s son, Jim atones for both the recent offense and, presumably, the original transgression, accepting his death at the hands of Doramin, the vengeful chieftain. When Jewel asks him if he will fight or flee, he replies: “There is nothing to fight for. [...] There is no escape” (Conrad 1996: 244). Even if Jim is delusional or Quixotic, he has been assimilated into his adopted world. He does not shirk what he sees to be the inescapable moral imperative imposed by local tradition and custom. He is finally at home because he holds himself accountable.

The *Pasos* narrator, by contrast, evades commitment to his adoptive community, returns to civilization, then, indecisive, attempts to recover the irrecoverable. It is as if he orchestrates the futile attempt to locate the lost community in order to justify his eventual pessimism. His negativity is couched in transcendent and apocalyptic terms:

El que se esfuerza por comprender demasiado, el que sufre las zozobras de una conversión, el que puede abrigar una idea de renuncia al abrazar las costumbres de quienes forjan sus destinos sobre este légame primero, en lucha trabada con las montañas y los árboles, es hombre vulnerable por cuanto ciertas potencias del mundo que ha dejado a sus espaldas siguen actuando sobre él. He viajado a través de las edades, pasé a través de los cuerpos y de los tiempos de los cuerpos, sin tener conciencia de que había dado con la recóndita estrechez de la más ancha puerta. (Carpentier 1985: 329)

Perhaps the closest literary analogue to the narrator’s purported tale of a disenchanted modern who discovers an isolated and unspoiled community far from the wickedness and snares of civilization is James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*, first published in 1933, and adapted as a film by Frank Capra in 1937. Hilton’s protagonist, Conway, is exactly the kind of impossibly versatile and gifted man the narrator would love to be. A Renaissance man described as “amazingly many-sided” (Hilton 1964: 4), an accomplished scholar and athlete, excelling in languages, Conway is also a musician described by another character as “the best amateur pianist I ever heard” (Hilton 1964: 4). A tall youth who “not only excelled at games but walked off with every conceivable kind of school prize” (Hilton 1964: 5), this paragon, “outstandingly first-rate in school theatricals”, is admired by all for his “casual versatility, his good looks, that effervescent combination of mental with physical activities”. Rutherford, the writer whose reminiscence yields the core narration of the novel, profiles this prodigy: “we have a special word of disparagement for them –we call them dilettanti” (Hilton 1964: 6). To this Hilton’s primary narrator adds: “Our civilization doesn’t often breed people like that nowadays” (Hilton 1964: 6).

This remarkable protagonist of Hilton’s lost world fable will undergo the adventure and the ordeal of discovering and departing from the fabled Valley of the Blue Moon and the lamasery of Shangri-La. The latter place is an ideally ethical community and a treasure-trove of accumulated texts and artifacts. An aesthetic as well as spiritual haven, this secluded civilization particularly values music, as we see when Conway is surprised to learn that the High Lama’s favorite composer is Mozart, and that Shangri-La possesses “a complete library of European composers” (Hilton 1964: 109).

Hilton’s secluded utopia emphasizes isolation from modernity. Through some mystical process never clearly explained, the isolation of the place confers long life. Here the protagonist, one of several Europeans forcibly brought to Shangri-La, enacts two of lost world fiction’s most cherished stereotypes; he falls in love with a beautiful native, and is chosen by the High

Lama to become the latter's successor as leader and spiritual guide of the community. As if in confirmation of this election, he undergoes the ordeal of abandoning his adopted community, compelled by doubt as to the reality of the High Lama's explanations, and by ethical obligation toward a younger friend and colleague who attempts to escape. After undergoing dangers and hardships that induce a traumatic amnesia, he recovers his memory and undertakes a perilous but tantalizingly possible return journey. The novel ends on a poignantly uncertain note, as the primary narrator wonders if Conway ever managed to regain "the strange ultimate dream of Blue Moon" (Hilton 1964: 169). The ambiguity of the novel's ending is converted to a happy one by Frank Capra's adaptation, whose final shot shows Conway catching sight of his destination.

The *Pasos* narrator's account glamorizes ordinary travel by means of such tacit analogies. The travel themes that impel his storytelling point to issues of discovery, wisdom, ethical choice, cultural assimilation. However, the experience he tries to dress up as transcendent is, instead, one of flirtation and dalliance rather than commitment and sacrifice. We remember that the narrator cannot bring himself to shoot Nicasio, the leper, after his rape of a child, leaving the execution to be performed by the Adelantado's son. The narrator recoils, not at the brutality of the act itself, but at its transformative implications: "una fuerza, en mí, se resistía a hacerlo, como si, a partir del instante en que apretara al gatillo, *algo hubiera cambiado para siempre* [...] yo tenía miedo al tiempo que se iniciaría para mí a partir del segundo en que yo me hiciera Ejecutor" (Carpentier 1985: 288-289: italics in original). Confronted by this self-inflicted anti-climax, the best he can do, by way of dramatic conclusion, is to put a mythic spin on his journeying: "Hoy terminaron las vacaciones de Sísifo" (Carpentier 1985: 330).

Many have taken this bitter declaration to be the author's clue as to the meaning of the novel. This interpretation assumes an actually mythic parallel between the narrator's journey and the tale of Sisyphus. The latter figure's world, according to this reading, is circular, sterile, absurd, Kafkaesque; the very reality the narrator seeks to escape but is sadly doomed to inhabit (Acosta 2004: 98). Alienated from his essentially mercantile reality, the traveler at first seeks escape, but finally comes to see the futility of his attempt (Acosta 2004: 99). The shallow, materialist Mouche, whose experience of the primordial or native world is touristic rather than transcendent, is an astrologer and charlatan who personifies the fraudulence, the commercialized magic, from which the narrator seeks to abstract himself. Her voyage is a simulacrum of the real trajectory the narrator tries to describe; it is the alternative he seeks to contradict by pursuing his own quest for an authentic magic of the true primitive, a genuine *Paradise Lost* (Acosta 2004: 100).

What the narrator has supposedly gleaned from his ordeal is a sad wisdom regarding his inescapable destiny as a modern. However, in his significant reference to the notion of a vacation from the world of which he is doomed to be a denizen, and in his melodramatic renunciation of the possibility of truly going native, the narrator more closely resembles another type characterized earlier in *Lord Jim*. He is like the tourists described in chapter seven, "people with a-hundred-pounds-round-the-world tickets in their pockets" (Conrad 1996: 50). Such travelers, declares Marlow, "henceforth [...] would be labeled as having passed through this and that place, and so would be their luggage. They would cherish this distinction of their persons, and preserve the gummed tickets on their portmanteaus as documentary evidence, as the only permanent trace of their improving enterprise" (Conrad 1996: 50).

The fictional and non-fictional lost world accounts that provide odds and ends for the narrator's stitched-together patchwork would have been those that concentrated on centers

of human habitation and activity, such as cities and temples. The narrator's quest is oriented toward human geography. The adventure of seeking out merely isolated places, such as high mountains, Antarctic wastes, or uninhabited jungles, holds no interest for him. He makes a choice in favor of a certain kind of encounter. This encounter could be called touristic.

Tourism poeticizes travel. Its rhetorical and imagistic legerdemain transforms mundane displacement and inconvenience into a fetishized effigy of heroic itineration and meaningful ordeal. The narrator's deluded, self-serving scenario bespeaks a kind of tourism. This is perhaps the most precise characterization of the narrator: he is a tourist. The half-improvised, half-organized itinerary; the construing of transcendent meaning in the trivial situations that arise along the way; the alleged discovery of sacral significance in everyday encounters; in short, the presentation of the journey as a meaningful scenario, as a transformative there-and-back-again—these are the elements of an implicitly touristic experience.

The narrator's sojourn in Santa María de los Venados is a manufactured event. A subtler model defines the touristic gaze as a mutually complicit symbiosis that, enabling the native's self-representation and picaresque exploitation of the compliantly gullible outsider, allows travelers and travel narrators—real or virtual voyagers, merchants, diplomats, knights, tourists—to play the part of honorary community member or exotic interloper. The raree-show of alien folkways provides an array of counter-cultural roles. This transactive scenario plays out as a face-to-face interaction between ingenious hosts functioning as cultural entrepreneurs and role-playing visitors eager to experience staged events, "traditional" festivals, and "authentic" rituals (Stronza 2001: 267, 270-274; Bendix 1989: 133-139). Cooperatively deluded tourists and slyly entrepreneurial natives thus collaborate in the quasi-theatrics of what has been called the "pseudo-event". Citing Daniel Boorstin's definition of the latter concept, John Urry describes a typical scenario of guided groups and "inauthentic contrived attractions" (Urry 1990: 7). The stage-managed, amniotized credulity of tourism is subserved by a media and advertisement machine, constituting "a closed self-perpetuating system of illusions" (Urry 1990: 7).

Boorstin's concept of the pseudo-event seems a particularly suggestive parallel to the narrator's rambling apologia. The pseudo-event is defined in journalistic terms, as a "synthetic novelty" (Urry 1990: 9) contrived to generate reportage, publicity, notoriety (1990: 11). Presented as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (1990: 12), the pseudo-event is the preferred methodology of sensationalist media (1990: 13-16); the advertising industry, as exemplified by P. T. Barnum (Boorstin 1964: 210-211); and the travel industry, with its tourist attractions, get-aways, and scripted "adventures". On whatever scale, the pseudo-event is marked by its opportunistic pastiche of popularized academic references (e.g., history, archaeology, art history, ethnography), media manipulation, and synergetic collaboration among industrial sectors such as publishing, journalism, the various non-print media, travel, and transportation (Boorstin 1964: 78-80, 108-109, 181-183).

Voyeuristic scenarios allow the outsider to view or even participate in the most intimate workings of the host community. "Institutions", observes Dean MacCannell, "are fitted with arenas, platforms and chambers set aside for the exclusive use of tourists" (MacCannell 1976: 49; cited by Urry 1990: 8-9). The conjuration of this system resides, however, not in the experience of the seemingly intrusive tourist but in the dramaturgy contrived by local inhabitants and touristic entrepreneurs to accommodate the visitor's secular religiosity. The transformative power of the touristic encounter is further manifested in the consumer's promiscuous capacity to enjoy locally staged spectacle "without any knowledge of, or interest in, its [original] ritual significance" (MacCannell 1992: 233).

In construing his experience as a meaningful immersion, the narrator recreates the kind of destination tourism that goes beyond the mere visit to exotic environments. His journey and sojourn are like those complex tours orchestrated by specialized companies for the purposes of giving wealthy clients the impression of a go-native experience. He is his own tour guide. However, the perils encountered by ordinary tourists are not good enough for the narrator. He must convert, by means of his self-serving account, the quotidian inconvenience of travel into the meaningful ordeal of a rite of passage.

Various elements lend themselves to a touristic profile of the narrator. He is, first of all, a man of leisure. If tourism is largely defined as leisured travel, travel whose purpose is recreational in the broadest sense, the narrator qualifies. He is a man with time on his hands. Much of the excessive intensity of his account results from boredom. He seeks to fill the vacuum of his life with activity. One could view his journey as a kind of pilgrimage. What makes it tourism rather than pilgrimage is the fortuity of his discovery. This affords a kind of glamor that would not be conferred by the kind of cultural tour any leisured bourgeois could pay for. The unforeseeable improvisation of his adventure is in large measure the thing that justifies his claim to having lived an experience worth recounting. Even if his alleged transformation is couched in terms of a profound disillusion –he is Sisyphus resuming his daily round– it is nonetheless a wisdom attained by his suffering. He has lived a liminal moment; he is a new man, sadder but wiser.

To the degree that we detect sly design in Carpentier's construction of his protagonist, we must read the narrator's final pronouncements with skepticism. It is entirely likely that his chastened wisdom, supposedly hard-earned through long vicissitudes and sojourns among alien folk, is comparable to Gulliver's wiser-than-thou attitude at the end of his travels. "My reconciliation to the Yahoo kind in general", declares Swift's protagonist, "might not be so difficult, if they would be content with those vices and follies only which nature has entitled them to" (Swift 2001: 322). He who has lived among the "wise and virtuous Houyhnhnms, who abound in all excellences that can adorn a rational creature", may rightfully preach to his fellow Yahoos regarding, for example, the sin of pride, that most characteristically human vice. Just as Swift means to amuse us with Gulliver's unwitting pomposity in telling those afflicted with any "tincture of this absurd vice" to avoid his company, so too might Carpentier put words of pseudo-wisdom into the mouth of the philandering, deceitful, delusional tourist who is his narrator.

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