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I

A clearing in the jungle: from Santa Mónica to Macondo

> The Roman legalistic tradition is one of the strongest components in Latin American culture: from Cortés to Zapata, we only believe in what is written down and codified.
>
> Carlos Fuentes[1]

I

After a painful journey away from the modern world, the protagonist of Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) reaches Santa Mónica de los Venados, the town founded by the Adelantado, one of his traveling companions.[2] Santa Mónica is but a clearing in the South American jungle on which a few huts have been built.[3] The nameless protagonist has arrived, or so he wishes to believe, at the Valley-Where-Time-Has-Stopped, a place outside the flow of history. Here, purged of civilization, he hopes to rekindle his creative energies, to return to his earlier life as a composer; in short, to be true to himself. The narrator-protagonist plans to write a threnody, a musical poem based on the text of the *Odyssey*. Musical ideas rush to his mind, as if he had been able at last to tap a deep well of creativity within him. He asks the Adelantado, or Founder of Cities, for paper to write all this down. The latter, reluctantly, for he needs them to set down the laws of his new society, gives him a notebook. The narrator fills it very quickly in a frenzy of creativity and begs for another. Annoyed, the Adelantado gives it to him with the admonition that it will be the last one. He is forced to write very small, packing every available space, even creating a kind of personal shorthand, to be able to continue his work. Later, feeling sorry for him, the Adelantado relinquishes yet another notebook, but the narrator-protagonist is still reduced to erasing and rewriting

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what he has composed, for he lacks the space to move forward. Writing, erasing, rewriting, the narrator-protagonist's belabored manuscript already prefigures the economy of gain and loss of the Archive, the origin unveiled, the mode of current Latin American fiction made possible by Carpentier's novel. Many other such manuscripts will appear in the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa as emblems of the very text of the Latin American novel.

When the narrator decides to go back to civilization temporarily, he does so with the intention of procuring enough paper and ink to continue his composition once he returns to Santa Mónica. He does neither. Instead of finishing his threnody, the narrator-protagonist writes a series of articles about his adventures, which he tries to sell off to various publications. These may be, within the fiction, the fragments that lead up to the writing of the text we read, *Los pasos perdidos* (as in other modern novels, an unfinished manuscript represents, within the fiction, the novel in which it appears). The return to Santa Mónica is never accomplished either, for the rising waters of the river cover the inscription on the trunk of a tree that marked the channel to the town. There is writing everywhere in the jungle, but it is as unintelligible as that of the city from which he wishes to escape. The protagonist is caught between two cities, in one of which he must live. What he cannot do is live outside the city, outside of writing.

Two events, related to the need for paper, occur at the same time that the narrator-protagonist is pestering the Adelantado for notebooks. The first is when Fray Pedro, another traveling companion, insists that the protagonist marry Rosario, the native woman with whom he has paired off during his journey upriver. The second is the execution of Nicasio, the leper who raped a girl in the town. The narrator, who has a wife back in the modern world, does not want to subject Rosario to a hollow ceremony and cannot bear the thought of her treasuring a piece of paper from one of the notebooks that he so desires, on which the marriage certificate would no doubt be written. But Rosario, it turns out, has no urge to seal their union according to laws that would tie her down and make her subservient to him. Nicasio, killed by Marcos when the narrator-protagonist is unable to pull the trigger, is said to suffer from the leprosy of Leviticus, that is to say, from the malady that led nomadic tribes to draw up laws excluding those infected with the disease as they

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settled down in a given place. Marriage and the execution of Nicasio are events that stand at the beginning of the need to write, like the creative impulse of the narrator-protagonist. All three will find their way into the notebooks hoarded by the founder of cities. Writing begins in the city with the need to order society and to discipline in the punitive sense. The narrator-protagonist recognizes that the clearing he seeks is already occupied by civilization:

> No sólo ha fundado una ciudad el Adelantado, sino que, sin sospecharlo, está creando, día a día, una *polis*, que acabará por apoyarse en un código asentado solemnemente en el *Cuaderno de ... Perteneciente a ...* Y un momento llegará en que tenga que castigar severamente a quien mate la bestia vedada, y bien veo que entonces ese hombrecito de hablar pausado, que nunca alza la voz, no vacilará en condenar al culpable a ser expulsado de la comunidad y a morir de hambre en la selva ... (p. 268)

> Not only had the Adelantado founded a city, but, without realizing it, he was creating day by day a *polis* that would eventually rest on a code of laws solemnly entered in *Notebook ... Property of ...* And the moment would come when severe punishment would have to be imposed on anyone killing an animal in the closed season, and it was apparent that this little, soft-spoken man would not hesitate to sentence the violator to being driven from the community to die of hunger in the forest ... (p. 209)

Writing is bound to the founding of cities and to punishment.[4] The origin of the modern novel is to be found in this relationship, thematic traces of which appear throughout its history, from *Lazarillo* and *El coloquio de los perros* to *Les Misérables*, *Der Prozess*, and *El beso de la mujer araña*.

The reader of contemporary Latin American fiction will no doubt recognize in Santa Mónica de los Venados and the story about the unfinished manuscript – both of the threnody and the novel – prefigurations of Macondo and of Melquíades' writings in *Cien años de soledad* (1967). Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* is a turning point in the history of Latin American narrative, the founding archival fiction. It is a book in which all the important narrative modalities in Latin America, up to the time when it was published, are contained and analyzed as in a kind of active memory; it is a repository of narrative possibilities, some obsolete, others leading up to García Márquez. *Los pasos perdidos* is an archive of stories and a storehouse of the master-stories produced to narrate from Latin America. Just as the narrator-protagonist of the novel discovers that he is unable

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to wipe the slate clean to make a fresh start, so the book, in searching for a new, original narrative, must contain all previous ones, and in becoming an Archive return to the most original of those modalities. *Los pasos perdidos* brings us back to the beginnings of writing, looking for an empty present wherein to make a first inscription. What is found instead is a variety of beginnings at the origin, the most powerful being the language of the law. Thus *Los pasos perdidos* dismantles the central enabling delusion of Latin American writing: the notion that in the New World a new start can be made, unfettered by history. The new start is always already history; writing in the city. Because of his anxiety about origins, the narrator-protagonist's is the quintessential Latin American story and its critical undoing; hence its foundational quality both in terms of Latin American history and the history of the novel. By foundational I mean that it is a story about the prolegomena of telling a Latin American story. For instead of being relieved of history's freight, the narrator-protagonist discovers that he is burdened by the memory of the repeated attempts to discover or found the newness of the New World.[5] *Los pasos perdidos* is the story of this defeat that turns into a victory. In loosening the central constitutive idealization of Latin American narrative from its moorings, Carpentier's novel opens up the possibility of a critical reading of the Latin American tradition; one that would make manifest the stories, including the one of which the narrator is the protagonist, that constitute the Latin American narrative imagination. It is in the process of baring the consciousness of his narrator-protagonist that Carpentier lays out the ruins of that construct as a map for his fresh narrative project. But what are the fragments, the analecta in those ruins, and what do they have to do with the notebooks that the narrator-protagonist seeks from the Adelantado in Santa Mónica de los Venados?

The answer, as a kind of counterpoint, is found in García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad*, a text in which those master-stories are again told and the vestiges of the origin found by Carpentier examined in greater detail. *Cien años de soledad* contains, as in a blow-up, a map of the narrative possibilities or potentialities of Latin American fiction. If Carpentier's novel is the founding archival fiction, García Marquez' is the archetypical one. This is the reason why the Archive as myth constitutes its core.

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This man had in his possession a leaden box which, so he said, he had found among the ruined foundations of an ancient hermitage, that was being rebuilt. In this box he had found some parchments written in the Gothic script but in Castilian verse, which contained many of the knight's exploits and dwelt upon the beauty of Dulcinea del Toboso, the shape of Rocinante, the fidelity of Sancho Panza, and the burial of this same Don Quixote, together with various epitaphs and eulogies of his life and habits. Such of these as could be read and understood the trustworthy author of this original and matchless history has set down here, and he asks no recompense from his readers for the immense labours it has cost him to search and ransack all the archives of La Mancha in order to drag it into the light. *Don Quijote*, I, 52[6]

To most readers, the Latin American novel must appear to be obsessed with Latin American history and myth. Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* (1976), for instance, retells much of sixteenth-century Spanish history, including the conquest of Mexico, while also incorporating pre-Columbian myths prophesying that momentous event. Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces* (1962) narrates Latin America's transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth, focusing on the impact of the French Revolution in the Caribbean. Carpentier also delves into Afro-Cuban lore to show how Blacks interpreted the changes brought about by these political upheavals. Mario Vargas Llosa's monumental *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1980) tells again the history of Canudos, the rebellion of religous fanatics in the backlands of Brazil, which had already been the subject of Euclides da Cunha's classic *Os Sertões* (1902). Vargas Llosa's ambitious work also examines in painstaking detail the recreation of a Christian mythology in the New World. The list of Latin American novels dealing with Latin American history and myth is very long indeed, and it includes the work of many lesser known, younger writers. Abel Posse's *Daimón* (1978) retells the story of Lope de Aguirre, the sixteenth-century rebel who declared himself free from the Spanish Crown and founded his own independent country in South America. As the title of the book suggests, Posse's fiction centers on the myth of the Devil and his reputed preference for the New World as residence and field of operations, a theme that had been important in two earlier Latin American masterpieces,

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Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949) and João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956).

Given that myths are stories whose main concern is with origins, the interest of Latin American fiction in Latin American history and myth are understandable. On the one hand, Latin American history has always held the promise of being not only new but different, of being, as it were, the only *new* history, preserving the force of the oxymoron. On the other hand, the novel, which appears to have emerged in the sixteenth century at the same time as Latin American history, is the only modern genre, the only literary form that is modern not only in the chronological sense, but also because it has persisted for centuries without a poetics, always in defiance of the very notion of genre. Is it possible, then, to make of Latin American history a story as enduring as the old myths? Can Latin American history be as resilient and as useful a hermeneutical tool for probing human nature as the classical myths, and can the novel be the vehicle for the transmission of these new myths? Is it at all conceivable, in the modern, post-oral period, to create myths? Are the coeval births of the novel and the history of Latin America related beyond chronology? Can a new myth make the New World intelligible? More importantly for our purposes, can a novelistic myth be inscribed in the clearing that the narrator of *Los pasos perdidos* seeks, and is such a myth the archival fiction this novel and others following it turn out to be? Because it is the repository of stories about the beginnings of modern Latin America, history is crucial in the creation of this myth. Latin American history is to the Latin American narrative what the epic themes are to Spanish literature: a constant whose mode of appearance may vary, but which is rarely absent. A book like Ramón Menéndez Pidal's *La epopeya castellana a través de la literatura española*[7] could be written about the presence of Latin American history in the Latin American narrative. The question is, of course, how can myth and history coexist in the novel? How can founding stories be told in this most ironic and self-reflexive of genres? The enormous and deserved success of García Márquez' masterpiece *Cien años de soledad* is due to the unrelenting way in which these forms of storytelling are interwoven in the novel, which thereby unveils the past of the narrative process in Latin America and leads to a consideration of the novel as genre.

It is an uncritical reflex of philologically inspired literary history

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to think of the evolution of the novel in the same terms as that of other literary genres. This is a vestige of a kind of primitive historicism that is modeled on the natural sciences and which, in the case of the history of conventional literary forms, has yielded impressive results. I do not think that the same can be said of studies on the novel. I am not convinced by theories that attempt to make the novel evolve solely or even chiefly from the epic, or any other literary form. The most persistent characteristic of books that have been called novels in the modern era is that they always pretend not to be literature. The desire not to be literary, to break with *belles-lettres*, is the most tenacious element in the novel. *Don Quijote* is supposed to be the translation of a history written in Arabic, or of documents extracted from the archives of La Mancha; *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* is a deposition written for a judge, *The Pickwick Papers* are *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, Being a Faithful record of the Perambulations, Perils, Travels, Adventures, and Sporting transactions of the Corresponding Members: Edited by Boz*. Other novels are or pretend to be autobiographies, a series of letters, a manuscript found in a trunk, and so forth. Carpentier once exclaimed that most modern novels were received by criticism with the complaint that they were not novels at all, making it seem that, to be successful, the novel must fulfill its desire not to be literature.[8] He cited as examples *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Ulysses*. A number of years ago Ralph Freedman made a useful suggestion concerning the origins of the novel:

> Instead of separating genres or subgenres artificially and then accounting for exceptions by stipulating mixtures and compounds, it is simpler to view all of prose fiction as a unity and to trace particular strands to different origins, strands which would include not only the English novel of manners, or the post-medieval romance, or the Gothic novel, but also medieval allegory, the German *Bildungsroman*, or the picaresque. Some of these strands may be close to folk material or to classical epics, others may have modeled themselves on travelogues and journalistic descriptions of events, and others again suggest drawing-room comedies and even lyrical prose poetry, yet all, to varying degrees, seem to mirror life in aesthetically defined worlds (life as myth, as structure of reality, as worlds of feeling or quotidian reality) . . .[9]

I wish to retain from Freedman the notion of multiple origins and add that the origin of the novel is repeated, over and over again, only retaining the mimetic act *vis-à-vis* a nonliterary form, not directly as

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a mirror of life. The novel's origin is not only multiple in space but also in time. Its history is not, however, a linear succession or evolution, but a series of new starts in different places. The only common denominator is the novel's mimetic quality, not of a given reality, but of a given discourse that has already "mirrored" reality.

It is my hypothesis that the novel, having no fixed form of its own, often assumes that of a given kind of document endowed with truth-bearing power by society at specific moments in time. The novel, or what is called the novel at various points in history, mimics such documents to show their conventionality, their subjection to strategies of textual engenderment similar to those governing literature, which in turn reflect those of language itself. It is through this simulacrum of legitimacy that the novel makes its contradictory and veiled claim to literariness. The power to endow a text with the capacity to bear the truth is shown to lie outside the text by narratives that we call novelistic; it is an exogenous agent that bestows authority upon a certain kind of document owing to the ideological power structure of the period, not to any inherent quality of the document or even of the outside agent. The novel, therefore, is part of the discursive totality of a given epoch, occupying a place opposite its ideologically authoritative core. Its conception is itself a story about an escape from authority, which is often its subplot. Needless to say this flight to a form of freedom is imaginary, a simulacrum predicated on textual mimetism that appears to be embedded in narrativity itself, as if it were the *Ur*-story, the irreducible masterstory underlying all storytelling. This is perhaps the reason why the law figures prominently in the first of the masterstories the novel tells through texts like *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes*, Cervantes' *novelas ejemplares*, and the *crónicas de Indias*. The novel will retain from this origin its relation to punishment and the control of the State, which determines its mimetic penchant from then on. When the modern Latin American novel returns to that origin, it does so through the figure of the Archive, the legal repository of knowledge and power from which it sprung, as we observed in *Los pasos perdidos*.

Although I have learned a good deal from the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, as should be obvious, my approach here differs considerably from his. In the first place, because I like to see the novel as part of the textual economy of a given epoch, not simply or even primarily that part considered literary. In the second, I place more

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emphasis on texts that are part of official culture in the formation of the novel. In addition, I will include in my purview texts such as *Facundo* which are not considered novels in the conventional sense. My departure from Bakhtin may be due to the nature of my object of study – the Latin American narrative – which is created under circumstances that are considerably different from the European novel that interests him. I believe that Bakhtin dismisses too easily the role of official texts, which to my mind are fundamental in the formation of the modern novel. Bakhtin writes that "Carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages."[10] He also writes: "This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it" (p. 9). Bakhtin conceives of the official as something alien to society, as if officialdom were something extra-terrestrial, imposed on humanity by some foreign invader. But what he calls official is as much a part of society as laughter and carnival; in fact, one could not exist without the other.

Having said this, however, I should make clear that I do share certain assumptions with Bakhtin. For instance, that humankind is a producer of texts, that these texts never exist individually, but in relation to others, and that there is no possible metatext, but always an intertext.[11] That is to say, that I believe that my text is part of the economy of texts that it attempts to describe and classify, that my book is necessarily also an archival fiction. To my mind, the problem with Bakhtin is that he is still within the sphere of influence of classical anthropology, in the sense that he feels that the folk are some sort of privileged element of humankind, as the non-Europeans were to anthropologists, where something true, that can be betrayed by another part of humankind, survives. This is why he has trouble with the written. Writing is precisely part and parcel of officialdom. Here is where I choose to follow Michel Foucault. For Foucault, mediation is the very process of constraining, denying, limiting, invented by humanity itself; these hegemonic discourses which oppress, watch, control, and furnish the models parodied later, models without which parody itself could not exist. Cutting, slicing, locking up, writing, authority, is as much a contrivance of humankind as its antidotes. This is what I do not see present in Bakhtin's theories, and this is why he idealizes the folk. Intertextuality is not a quiet dialogue of texts – a pluralistic utopia perhaps born

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of the monolithic hell Bakhtin lived through – but a clash of texts, an imbalance among texts, some of which have a *molding and modeling* power over others.

The object of my study, then, is not simply the Latin American novel, but more broadly the Latin American narrative, and within that narrative an evolving core whose chief concern, particularly since the nineteenth century, is with the issue of the uniqueness of Latin America as a cultural, social and political space from which to narrate. The search for uniqueness and identity is the form the question of legitimacy takes after the colonial period. The very first narrative of Latin America is determined by the issue of legitimacy as granted by the documents through which the first modern state – Habsburg Spain – dealt with the issue of enfranchisement.

In sixteenth-century Spain, the documents imitated by the incipient novel were legal ones. (I use incipient only to signal a beginning, not to suggest that as the structure was established it first yielded a kernel; the whole structure is assumed to have been present in *Lazarillo*, the very "first" novel.) The form assumed by the Picaresque was that of a *relación* (report, deposition, letter bearing witness to something), because this kind of written report belonged to the huge imperial bureaucracy through which power was administered in Spain and its possessions. The early history of Latin America, as well as the first fictions of and about Latin America, are told in the rhetorical molds furnished by the notarial arts. These *cartas de relación* were not simply letters or maps, but were also *charters* of the newly discovered territories. Both the writer and the territory were enfranchised through the power of this document which, like Lazarillo's text, is addressed to a higher authority, as in the case of Hernán Cortés, who wrote to Emperor Charles V. The pervasiveness of legal rhetoric in early American historiography can hardly be exaggerated. Officially appointed historians (with the title of *Cronista Mayor de Indias*) were assigned a set of rules by the Crown and the Royal Council of the Indies which included ways of subsuming these *relaciones* into their compendious works. Latin American history and fiction, the narrative of Latin America, were first created within the language of the law, a secular totality that guaranteed truth and made its circulation possible. It is within this totality that Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca, wrote his *Comentarios reales de los incas* (1609), for, as will be seen in greater detail, the mestizo's book is an appeal to exonerate his father. Like Lázaro,

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