

# Concientización: Keystone to the Novels of Alejo Carpentier

JOHN M. KIRK, *Dalhousie University*

Although Alejo Carpentier has referred on several occasions to the "major themes" encountered in his work, he has never explained precisely what he means by this term. For instance in an interview with Luis Harss, Carpentier expressed his disdain for what he termed "the little psychological novel," a pejorative term he seems to apply to any book involving situations—especially when subjective or emotional—that are not of direct public relevance.<sup>1</sup> In their place he offered the more relevant "epic substance" which he contends derives from the same "major themes": "I like big themes . . . they are the ones that confer the greatest richness to the characters and plot of the novel."<sup>2</sup> To date several valuable attempts have been made to shed light both on the theory of Carpentier's understanding of these "grandes temas," and on their application in the Cuban writer's work. While most critics have made reference to Carpentier's obvious fascination with the Antillean and circum-Caribbean regions, and to his eloquent appraisal of that area's magical reality ("lo real maravilloso"), several interesting—and at times contradictory—hypotheses concerning these "temas" have also been advanced.<sup>3</sup> At the risk of oversimplification, one can state that such interpretations have revolved around a core of related issues, namely Liberty-Revolution, War, Human Nature, and Time. While not disagreeing necessarily with these views, it does appear however that a further theme, *concientización*, can also be advanced, not only as one of the elusive "major themes" but also as a common denominator of all the novels of Alejo Carpentier.

The terms *concientización* (or its occasional variant *concienciación*) are expressions which have only come into vogue in recent years and like the terms *politicización* ("politicization") and *literatura comprometida* (best translated by the French, "littérature engagée") are occasionally misunderstood. *Concientización* may be loosely translated into English by the rather awkward phrase "consciousness-raising," although as one sociologist has shown, it also comprises other elements: "an amalgam of consciousness, conscience, conscientiousness, and commitment."<sup>4</sup> In other words people who experience this process—generally in the spheres of social, political or moral questions—become more "conscious" or "aware," both of the external reality surrounding them and of the internal reality of their own

---

<sup>1</sup>Luis Harss, *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>Harss, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>To take one example, the Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal claims that Carpentier's work shows the limitations of any Revolution, while Edmundo Desnoes explains how, despite temporary setbacks, the original revolutionary ideas eventually do indeed result in social improvement. See Rodríguez Monegal, "Traectoria de Alejo Carpentier," *Narradores de esta América* (Montevideo: Editorial Alfa, 1969), I, p. 278; and Desnoes, "El siglo de las luces," *Homenaje a Alejo Carpentier*, ed. Giacomani (New York: Las Américas, 1970), p. 311.

<sup>4</sup>Opinion of Joseph Kahl, cited by Marvin Leiner in *Children Are the Revolution: Day Care in Cuba* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 16.

character. Thus, *concientizados* of their nature, and of the surrounding conditions, they are able to perceive all from a new, enlightened, perspective. It is such a process of *concientización*, this paper maintains, that is one of the principal—if long ignored—*grandes temas* found in all the principal novels of Alejo Carpentier, three of which are discussed here: *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*), 1949, *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*), 1953, and *El siglo de las luces* (*Explosion in a Cathedral*), 1962.

In interpreting Carpentier's work much confusion has been engendered both by the Cuban writer's observations on the historical process, and by his setting of much of his work in an earlier era, essentially to illustrate the relevance of past occurrences to present-day situations. This decision was a deliberate one, since Carpentier's purpose, he has explained, was to "conjugar acciones en pasado-presente o en presente-pasado. Creo . . . que en el pasado pueden hallarse elementos que explican el presente."<sup>5</sup> This observation, and many of a similar nature, have encouraged critics to assume that, for Carpentier, past and present times are totally interchangeable, and that—apparently by the novelist's own admission—the historical process must be viewed as embodying a repetitive, cyclical pattern.

At first glance the works of Carpentier would appear to bear out this interpretation. The best example to support such a thesis is probably *The Kingdom of This World*, where we continually encounter the theme of the exploitation of man. First we see the black slaves literally whipped into submission by the French settlers in Haiti. Later, when the novel's protagonist Ti Noël returns to his homeland after the overthrow of the white plantation owners and *colonos*, he confidently expects the seeds of liberty sown by the recent uprising to have borne fruit. Instead he is rudely disappointed, for he finds the reign of terror imposed by the new (black) overlord, Henri Christophe, to be even more despicable, since as he notes, "there was a limitless affront in being beaten by a negro as black as oneself, as thick-lipped and woolly-headed, as flat-nosed; as low-born; perhaps branded, too" (p. 74).<sup>6</sup>

This second cycle of oppression is ultimately quashed, however, since once again the black rulers underestimate the spiritual powers of their subjects. (Despite his black heritage, Christophe rejects the whole concept of folk-religion and voodoo, preferring instead to nurture a facade of Christianity and of rather elaborate European trappings). Again, however, the exploited nation — after overthrowing Henri Christophe—fails to consolidate its position in victory, and as a result a new cycle begins, controlled this time by a different group, the "Republican mulattoes." Consequently the slaves find themselves, for the third time, at the mercy of heartless rulers: "Ti Noël learned from a fugitive that farm work had been made obligatory, and that the whip was now in the hands of Republican mulattoes, the new masters of the Plaine du Nord" (p. 107). The struggle for liberty has thus once again been aborted, resulting in a further round of dictatorship.

This rather depressing situation has been seen as the inevitable result of what many critics interpret as Carpentier's view of History in general, and in particular his conviction concerning the impossibility of effecting meaningful social change through revolution. Therefore, while the slaves succeeded twice in freeing

---

<sup>5</sup>Cited by Alexis Márquez Rodríguez, *La obra narrativa de Alejo Carpentier* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1970), p. 161.

<sup>6</sup>In this paper all quotations from Carpentier's work are taken from the following editions: *The Kingdom of This World* (trans. Harriet de Onís), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975; *The Lost Steps* (trans. Harriet de Onís), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968; *Explosion in a Cathedral* (No translator given), Harmondsworth Penguin Books, 1971.

themselves—briefly—from the tyranny of their overlords, on each occasion they fell prey to a subsequent form of exploitation. In a thoughtful article Andrés Sorel underlines what he views as this circular, inherently pessimistic, view of the historical process held by Carpentier: “. . . el hombre camina por surcos que parecen distintos, que parecen llevar a un espacio situado más allá de su propio tiempo, y que te vuelve, cuando parecía llegar al final, al punto de partida. Todo tornará a repetirse, todo estará otra vez por hacer, todo vuelve a empezar justamente donde había terminado.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a reading, however, seems somewhat precipitate, particularly if we consider the dramatic conclusion of the novel, and view the work in the context of all of Carpentier's other major works. Indeed, although Ti Noël is executed by his mulatto masters, his memory lives on to inspire his fellow slaves, just as the name of his predecessor in the liberating struggle, Mackandal, is *still* revered—Carpentier informs us in the novel's prologue—in contemporary Haiti. It is perhaps also worth mentioning the peculiar disappearance of Ti Noël who, after he is killed, ascends in the shape of a “*cross of feathers*” (my underlining). Emil Volek has emphasized, correctly, this point, claiming also that the name Noël (“Christmas,” “the birth of Christ”) symbolizes a degree of hope for future liberating attempts.<sup>8</sup>

One could thus argue that, in their struggle against seemingly invincible foes, the black slaves—symbols of the oppressed around the world—eloquently reveal their determination to continue fighting to the death in order to obtain their eventual liberation. Moreover, it is worth noting that the fundamental “message” of Carpentier—found, as in all his work, toward the end of his novels—is underlined even more firmly by the moral and political development of his protagonist, Ti Noël. Prior to the ultimate confrontation with the Mulattoes, he has at all times participated in the revolutionary sallies in a rather lethargic, unconvinced fashion, fighting not out of personal conviction, but rather through loyalty to the revolutionary leaders Bouckman and Mackandal. Yet at the end of the novel his *concientización* has grown dramatically, for not only has he mastered the arts of voodoo and spearheaded the attacks of his fellow slaves against the new “cycle of oppression,” but he has also found a purpose to his life. In a key introspective passage, Ti Noël shows precisely how his consciousness has been raised:

Now he understood that a man never knows for whom he suffers and hopes. He suffers and hopes and toils for people he will never know, and who, in turn, will suffer and hope and toil for others who will not be happy either, for man always seeks a happiness far beyond that which is meted out to him. But man's greatness consists in the very fact of wanting to be better than he is. In laying duties upon himself. In the Kingdom of Heaven there is no grandeur to be won, inasmuch as there all is an established hierarchy, the unknown is revealed, all is rest and joy. For this reason, bowed down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials, man finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World. (p. 112)

It is thus “in wanting to be better than he is,” in selflessly giving himself to his fellow humans, that man attempts to break out of this circular maze, struggling—as do Bouckman, Mackandal, and finally Ti Noël—to improve their human condition. It is worth noting in passing that Carpentier hints at the need for human talents to

---

<sup>7</sup>Andrés Sorel, “El mundo novelístico de Alejo Carpentier,” *Homenaje a Alejo Carpentier*, ed. Giacoman, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup>Emil Volek, “Análisis e interpretación de *El reino de este mundo*,” *Homenaje a Alejo Carpentier*, ed. Giacoman, p. 167.

be used collectively, and not individually. Thus, as Raymond Souza has indicated, Ti Noël originally attempts to use his knowledge of voodoo for his personal use, and fails. Thereupon he "realizes that any powers he possesses must not be used to escape from man but to better man's condition."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly Ti Noël issues the call to arms, enlightened now by the knowledge that, with every liberating attempt (tortuous but ultimately successful, he intimates), man is slowly inching his way forwards to liberty and self-realization.

On another level it is clear that while Mackandal, the Jamaican Bouckman, and finally Ti Noël are all executed, their revolutionary attempts completely quashed, there are nevertheless indications that definite progress has been accomplished, since in the aftermath of all three the cause of liberty espoused by them lives on, in each case stronger than before. To a certain degree, then, this novel can indeed be seen as reflecting what one critic has termed "lo inmortal e invencible que son los anhelos y la lucha de un pueblo por la libertad y lo imposible que es detenerlos con la ejecución de uno o más líderes. Inmediatamente aparecen otros que, en el momento culminante de su carrera llegan a ser . . . héroes en el sentido exacto de la palabra. Cumplen con su tarea histórica y desaparecen en la leyenda."<sup>10</sup>

The view of Sorel expressed earlier would also—at first sight—appear applicable to Carpentier's next major work, *The Lost Steps*, since (on a superficial level, at least) the protagonist, a musician, encounters a similarly unhappy fate, and indeed "todo vuelve a empezar justamente donde había terminado." He leaves the spiritually arid ambience of a sprawling North-American city, in which he leads a Sisyphus-like existence, "ascending and descending the hill of days, with the same stone on my back, I kept going through a momentum acquired in jerks and spasms, but which sooner or later would end on a date that might be on this year's calendar" (p. 10). Eventually he reaches a remote area of Latin America where life finally seems to hold some meaning for him. Unfortunately he feels compelled to travel briefly to North America, and by the time he returns to the idyllic jungle setting and to his beloved Rosario, she has married. All now seems in vain for the unnamed protagonist, who sadly abandons Santa Mónica de los Venados and takes up residence again in "Civilization."

The cyclical structure is immediately obvious, since the narrator is quite clearly at the point from which his Odyssey started, with the one major difference being that he has now also lost the woman he loved. Yet the picture is not entirely black, since he has learned much of value during his pilgrimage, and has experienced many dramatic changes to his life. As a result many of his earlier ideas, and indeed many cultural works (earlier accepted unquestioningly by him,) "lay dead forever on the shelves of my library" (p. 228). Moreover, the experiences he underwent in the remote village of Santa Mónica de los Venados have clearly left a lasting impression on his music, which now appears to him far more original, and more authentic. Therefore as Raymond Souza has noted, like Ti Noël he will now consciously benefit from this purging experience, using his work as an illustration of man's potential: ". . . as a creative artist his task is to reveal to his contemporaries locked within an apocalyptic age the primal truths of the world of Genesis. He then becomes a mediator between the two realms, drawing from one to rejuvenate the other."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Raymond D. Souza, *Major Cuban Novelists: Innovation and Tradition* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1976), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup>Volek, p. 163.

<sup>11</sup>Souza, p. 44.

But perhaps the most convincing evidence to illustrate this *concientización* process is the attitude of the unnamed protagonist (thereby intended as a representative of modern society?) who, despite his tremendous disappointment at not being able to return to “the Fourth Day of Creation,” nevertheless has learned much about himself and his society following the experiences in this “primitive” community. He can now see the pointless and rather sordid existence of his “advanced” society in the nameless North-American city where he lives: “I was amazed to see how the people around me came, went, passed one another on the wide pavement, in a rhythm that had nothing to do with their organic wills. If they walked at one pace rather than another, it was because their walking was linked to the idea of getting to the corner in time to see the green light go on to tell them they could cross the avenue” (p. 224). The end result of this process is a super-organized, selfish, and rather meaningless form of existence, Carpentier’s protagonist suggests: “From these cement mazes emerged, exhausted, men and women who had sold another day of their time to the enterprises that fed them. They had lived another day without living, and would now restore their strength to live another day tomorrow which would not be lived either, unless they fled—as I used to do, at this same hour—to the din of the dance-hall or the benumbing of drink, only to find themselves the next sunrise more desolate, wearier, sadder than before” (p. 226). Consequently, while on a superficial level—as in *The Kingdom of This World*—the protagonist would appear to be facing inevitable defeat, there is indeed a message of hope extended for the future, one based precisely upon a profound awareness of the limits of “Civilization.”

The relationship between rebellion and liberty (a key theme in the Cuban writer’s work) is perhaps the fundamental issue treated in Carpentier’s *Explosion in a Cathedral*. Continually contrasted in this work are the differences between the characters’ idealistic, and somewhat naive, concept of freedom, and the ensuing brutal revolutionary reality. On the one hand, then, while Victor Hugues offers to “liberate” people, extending to them the noble concepts of Freedom, Brotherhood, and Equality, on the other he protects these new-found liberties (and suppresses all forms of dissent) with the guillotine. The Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal not only views this situation as a fair reflection of the outcome of all revolutionary attempts during the past two centuries, but also considers this to be Carpentier’s interpretation: “¿Cómo no pensar que Carpentier sabe que desde 1789 la Historia ha demostrado una y otra vez que las mejores revoluciones, las más justas, las más desinteresadas ideológicamente, acaban siendo utilizadas por minorías estratégicas en beneficio propio?”<sup>12</sup>

As in the case of the other two novels, *Explosion in a Cathedral* does indeed appear—at first sight—to bear out the critic’s remarks, particularly if we consider the revolutionary fervor of Victor Hugues. Esteban follows his *padre espiritual* to France, prepared to make an effective contribution to the revolutionary struggle. Disenchantment gradually sets in, however, followed by a refutation of the “liberating” doctrine. (At one dramatic moment he asks a companion what he would do if the struggle were to fail, to which his friend replied, “with a gesture of resignation: ‘In spite of everything I shall go on the same. When you’ve worked at making a revolution, it’s difficult to go back to what you did before’” (p. 120). It would thus appear on the most obvious level at least, that the ideological inspiration lasted but a short time, being soon replaced by a vague form of inertia. Soon afterwards Hugues is sent to govern the island of Guadeloupe, where, as well as the doctrine of Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality, he also introduces the guillotine. Esteban’s disillusionment continues to increase and in a very moving scene he finally confronts his mentor: “I dreamed of such a different revolution,”

<sup>12</sup>Rodríguez Monegal, p. 284.

murmured Esteban. 'And who authorized you to believe in what didn't exist?' Victor asked him. 'Anyway all this is just empty talk. . . . A revolution is not argued about, it's done' " (p. 154).

This apparent failure—yet again—of the revolutionary process, and the resulting circular time structure found in the other novels of Carpentier, is studied in some detail by Luis Harss in his chapter on the Cuban (significantly subtitled "The Eternal Return") of his milestone of contemporary Latin-American criticism, *Into the Mainstream*. Basically he supports the view developed by Rodríguez Monegal, although Harss quite clearly understands a little better the ambivalent, subtle complexity of Alejo Carpentier's position: "Undoubtedly there is a duality in Carpentier: the political militant alternates, at unexpected moments with the ecumenic scholar for whom the essence of history—which can be annoyingly reactionary—is that it repeats itself. So it is, for instance, that revolutions become establishments, which eventually, rounding out the cycle, succumb to new revolutions . . . . On an absolute scale, outside time, there is no forward—or backward—movement, only the endless swing of a pendulum from a point suspended in space to its antipode."<sup>13</sup> This view, however, ignores not only Carpentier's epigraph (taken from Zohar) to the novel ("words are not uttered in vain") but also what Carpentier himself has claimed to be the true sense of the novel—as typified by Sofia's eventual appreciation of the need for social change, despite the at times sordid reality of revolutionary society—and, finally, by her actions.

Both Sofia and Esteban agonize over the concept of revolution, passing from an initial heady atmosphere to a gloomy despair at the extremes of "revolutionary justice," for as Esteban notes, "the Age of the Scaffold had succeeded to the Age of the Tree of Liberty" (p. 269). Sofia condemns passionately the way in which the French Revolution, exported to Guadeloupe and Cayenne, has in many ways reverted to an orgy of wanton slaughter and subsequent exploitation—all carried out in the name of liberty. Yet at the same time she rationalizes that this particular corrupt "revolution" does not therefore mean that *all* revolutions necessarily had to follow this sorrowful path—something which most critics have chosen to overlook. Thus, despite her encounter with the disastrous Cayenne experience Sofia, like Ti Noël, realizes that man's greatness can only be reached after treading a path fraught with major (but essentially temporary) obstacles and setbacks. Once again we see one of Carpentier's characters stressing the need to adopt a long-term historical perspective, as the Cuban author describes the continuing struggle to reach a stage of *concientización*:

One could not live without a political idea; the happiness of a whole people could not be achieved at the first attempt; grave errors had been made certainly, but these errors would serve as a useful guide for the future; she realized that Esteban had been through certain painful experiences—and she sympathized with him very much—but perhaps he had been the victim of an exaggerated idealism; she admitted that the excesses of the Revolution were deplorable, but great human victories could not be achieved without pain and sacrifice. To sum up: nothing big could be done in this world without blood being shed. (p. 271)

Following her disillusioning experience in Cayenne, Carpentier could easily have made Sofia follow Esteban's example, renouncing totally her earlier naive idealism. (In the same way as the novelist could have had Ti Noël resign himself to a

---

<sup>13</sup>Harss, p. 49.

life under the Mulatto Republicans, and the composer of *The Lost Steps* return to his earlier life style.) Yet Carpentier deliberately refuses to let her—and the other characters noted above—follow this course of action, instead electing to put her ideas to the test once again. Consequently many years later—and once again, it is interesting to note, towards the end of the novel—when both Sofia and Esteban are in Spain, we are shown explicitly how she overcomes her earlier disillusionment, returning to do battle for a cause in which she believes. Therefore, when Napoleon's troops enter Madrid on May 2, 1808, Sofia immediately picks up a sabre and tries to coax Esteban to join the popular struggle. He prefers not to become embroiled in the rebellion, and in fact cannot grasp Sofia's reasoning:

It was at this moment that Sofia left the window: 'Let's go down there!' she cried snatching down swords and daggers from the collection on the wall. Esteban tried to restrain her:  
'Don't be an idiot, they're shooting. You can't do any good with those bits of old iron.'  
'Stay here if you want to. I'm going.'  
'And who are you going to fight for?'  
'For the people who've run into the streets,' cried Sofia.  
'We've got to do something.' (p. 361)

Both are ultimately killed in the uprising but, like Bouckman and Mackandal, have risen above personal desires and, *concientizados*, have fought for the common good, in an attempt to fulfill their obligations in the "Kingdom of this World."

An overview of the weltanschauung of the three protagonists reveals characteristics common to all. Both Ti Noël and Sofia, for example, throw themselves wholeheartedly into the collective struggle against tyranny, knowing that, while they personally may die, their contribution to the common good will prevail, that they are important links in this process of developing *conciencia* among their peers. The case of the anonymous musician of *The Lost Steps* is somewhat different, since unlike the others he does not possess the same missionary zeal. Yet common to his struggle too is a determination to rise above both a temporary defeat (the loss of Rosario, and the impossibility of returning to live in Santa Mónica), a refutation of what he now perceives as a meaningless existence, and a rejection of the apparent failure inherent in his return to the point of departure. What all these protagonists share is an awareness that, while they all appear as victims of a circular time structure, in fact they have learned something of value during the course of these experiences, and that therefore, despite setbacks, their lives have been irreversibly changed—in short, they have become *concientizados*. As a result, progress—in essence the result of human tenacity and a desire to improve one's material and spiritual conditions (both of which clearly derive from a reawakened *conciencia*)—is gradually achieved, as Salvador Bueno has correctly noted: ". . . esos círculos viciosos se rompen, la trayectoria cíclica de la historia es superada por el hombre que siempre se impone nuevas tareas; cada nuevo estado histórico, aunque parece repetir el ciclo anterior, lo supera, porque el hombre traza en la historia una espiral, lenta, difícil, pero segura, que constituye la trabajosa marcha de la humanidad en busca de una mayor felicidad en el Reino de este mundo."<sup>14</sup>

This paper, studying three of Alejo Carpentier's major novels has attempted to show that the commonly-held view of many critics (who claim that Carpentier's

---

<sup>14</sup>Salvador Bueno, "Alejo Carpentier y su concepto de la historia," *El ensayo y la crítica literaria iberoamericana: Memoria del XIV Congreso de literatura iberoamericana, Universidad de Toronto, 23-28 de agosto de 1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 263.

work reveals his fascination with a circular time structure) is in fact a little simplistic. Instead, this essay contends that, while many of his characters do indeed return to the point from which they first departed, they are all very different now from their earlier condition. The fundamental difference is of course that they now possess *conciencia*, the result of learning from experiences (including errors), which allows them all—Ti Noël, the musician of *The Lost Steps*, and Sofia—to plot, by means of a conscious form of reasoning, their psychological and moral development.<sup>15</sup>

Admittedly this determination to impose their will upon seemingly insoluble problems and to embark upon the resulting Odyssey along “una espiral lenta, difícil, pero segura” (to use Bueno’s excellent analogy), does not come easily. Nevertheless, all of Carpentier’s protagonists, following the process of *concientización*, throw themselves into this task with great energy, believing against all odds that they can make a lasting impression upon their environment. But then this should not surprise us, for as Ti Noël so eloquently puts it, “man’s greatness consists in the very fact of wanting to be better than he is” (p. 112).

This same grandeur can also be seen clearly in the very life of Alejo Carpentier, whose untimely death on April 24, 1980, brought to a close one of the major chapters in the world of Hispanic letters. Like all his characters, Carpentier too underwent a process of *concientización*, including a period of imprisonment following his criticisms of the Machado tyranny, working for UNESCO, and supporting the government of Fidel Castro when it was fashionable for many intellectuals to abandon the Cuban cause. The common denominator of these activities was his conviction that, despite any temporary setbacks that might result from his stance, the mainstream advantages would make his position a justifiable one.

---

<sup>15</sup>This concern of Carpentier with the moral content of his work has been noted by Luis Harss: “The import of Carpentier’s work must be seen in his personal role as apostle and apologist for the Cuban Revolution, whose contemporary realities, in his view, embody ancestral truths of premonitory significance for all of Latin America. The novelist’s duty, as he sees it, is to help define these truths, then place himself at their service. Not as an agitator—but ‘literature of violence,’ as someone called it, belongs to the past—but as a moralist.” Harss, p. 65.