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ESE IDIOMA: ALEJO CARPENTIER'S TONGUE-TIES

ABSTRACT: The well-publicized discovery that Alejo Carpentier was born in Europe and that he may not have reached Cuba or learned Spanish until he was well into his childhood opens a new avenue of analysis into his work. Carpentier's exuberant prose reveals a deep-seated anxiety about his relations with the Spanish language, a tense tongue-tie that shapes his literary performances.

Keywords: *bilingualism, Alejo Carpentier, diglossia, extraterritoriality, fiction, heterolingualism, mother tongue, Spanish American*

> Hablaba su propio idioma. Había logrado la suprema libertad.
> —Alejo Carpentier, "Viaje a la semilla"

IN "AUTOBIOGRAFÍA DE URGENCIA," an often-cited essay published in 1965, Alejo Carpentier states that he was born in the heart of Havana, on a street called Maloja, on 26 December 1904. His parents, he goes on to say, immigrated to Cuba in 1902, coincidentally the year when Cuba became a republic. His father, Georges Carpentier, a French architect, and his mother, Lina, who was Russian, had met in Switzerland, where she was a medical student. Convinced that European civilization was bankrupt, Georges and Lina moved to Cuba looking for a fresh start in the young country. Sometime after his Carpentier's birth, his parents bought a large farm on the outskirts of Havana, where he spent his childhood and adolescence, in everyday contact with the Cuban countryside and Cuban peasants. Carpentier repeated this story, with slight variations, throughout his life.

It is now all but certain, however, that the account is a fabrication, one of those biographical *embustes* that Carpentier, at the end of his life, would attribute to the fictional Columbus of *El arpa y la sombra*. Carpentier was not born in Cuba, and it is not clear how old he was when he and his parents arrived on the island. Although rumors of Carpentier's European birth had circulated since the 1920s, what may be dubbed the "Maloja myth" did not begin to unravel until a decade after his death, when Guillermo Cabrera Infante—no friend of the author of *El reino de este mundo*—reported that he had received an anonymous fax of Carpentier's birth certificate. It indicated that Alejo (né Alexis) was indeed been born on 26 December 1904, but in Lausanne, Switzerland. His mother's maiden name was not Valmont, as Carpentier had said, but Blagooblasof. Contemporaneously with Cabrera Infante, Gastón Baquero disclosed the same information in a newspaper column. More recently, Roberto González Echevarría and Enrico Mario Santí have added further corroborative details, including confirmation from Carpentier's first wife, Eva Fréjaville.[1]

According to González Echevarría, who has written perceptively about Carpentier's autobiographical fabulations, what is most significant is the act of lying rather than the content of the lie ("La nacionalidad" 69). Always vague or evasive when questioned about his early years, Carpentier devised a life story that validated his literary ambitions. To speak credibly for *el hombre americano,* to describe through native eyes the untold wonders of the New World, he needed to be Latin American himself; and not only Latin American but *criollo*—that is, born in Latin America of parents born elsewhere. Even Carpentier's explanation of his father's motives for leaving Europe not only anticipates the son's decision to return to Cuba in 1939 after a decade-long hiatus in Paris but also makes the father's career foreshadow the son's. If Georges was present at the birth of a nation, Alejo will be present at what he regarded as the literary birth of a continent. If Georges designed some of the most important buildings in the capital of the fledgling republic, Alejo will leave behind a body of work that will signal Latin America's literary coming-of-age.[2]

The real circumstances of Carpentier's birth, as well as the effort to conceal them, raise the question of his "tongue ties," that is, his affective relations with his two languages, French and Spanish (Pérez Firmat, *Tongue Ties* 1–4). Beyond its considerable interest as gossip, Carpentier's Swiss birth certificate (and, perhaps, his European upbringing) lead us to ask to what extent the non-nativeness of his Spanish informs the content and texture of his writing. Does Carpentier, the theorist of *lo real maravilloso americano,* the precursor of the Latin American "boom," actually belong to the group of "extraterritorial" writers discussed by George Steiner in his classic essay? Could it be that Carpentier's peers are not only Onetti, Rulfo, and García Márquez but also Conrad, Santayana, and Nabokov? And what impact does this reframing have on the way we read his work? From this perspective, it may undergo an anamorphosis that reconfigures some of its best-known features: the vast erudition, the *recherché* vocabulary, the absence of dialogue, the chapter-long paragraphs. Discussing another extraterritorial writer, Joseph Brodsky, John Taylor has spoken of the air of strangeness—the "xenity"—of Brodsky's English-language poetry (594). I believe that a similar xenity appears in Carpentier's writing—not because of the occasional gallicisms, but because of a deep-seated anxiety about his relations with Spanish, a tense tongue-tie that shapes his literary performances.

Although Carpentier published a fair amount in French while he lived in Paris between 1928 and 1939, he always claimed Spanish as his only tongue, that is, as the language that spoke for him, the one that embodied him intellectually and emotionally.[3] While admitting that he had been raised bilingually, he tended to downplay the significance of the French language in his life, explaining that although his parents always spoke in French, the first words he heard were Spanish: "El primer idioma que oí fue el español, por boca de la nodriza que me crió. Nací en una ciudad donde se habla español, y aprendí a leer y escribir en colegios donde se enseñaba esa lengua. Pero también es cierto que mis padres me hablaban francés en casa, y por ello hablo los dos idiomas y puedo escribirlos" (Chao 19). Carpentier here sets up an asymmetrical relation between his two languages. Although French is his "heritage" language, the one handed down by his parents—and more narrowly, by his French father—Spanish enjoys the privilege of priority, because it was the language of the first words he heard. French belongs to the father, whereas Spanish belongs not to the mother but to a maternal surrogate, the *nodriza*. (About his mother's native tongue, Russian, Carpentier is silent.)

But the anecdote is fishy, for it seems doubtful that the first words heard by the newborn Alejo came from his nurse rather than his parents. Moreover, how does he know? Did his parents tell him, in French, that the first words he had heard had been in Spanish? If Carpentier was born in Switzerland, it is unlikely that the *nodriza* ever existed. The purpose of the anecdote, which sounds like another autobiographical fable, is to claim Spanish as his birth language, his native tongue. As allegorical as any of the characters in his novels, the *nodriza* supplied something that his mother or father could not: the illusion of linguistic rootedness.[4]

A self-professed heir to the romantics, Carpentier believed that languages had souls and that to partake of the soul of a language, one had to be born into its speech community. It is enough to read the important but insufficiently known, *Tristán e Isolda en Tierra Firme* (1949) to appreciate the extent to which he bundled together personal, linguistic, and regional identity. Speaking of Heitor Villa-Lobos, he says, "Hay un cierto andante, en el *Sexto Cuarteto* de Villa-Lobos, en que el americanismo es cosa tan de 'adentro,' tan de idiosincracia, tan de nacimiento, como el 'eslavismo' de la frase monódica que abre la introducción del *Boris* [*Godunov,* de Mussorgsky]" (31). Elsewhere he argues that the work of francophone writers such as Lautréamont and the Parnassian poet José María de Heredia, who spent most of their lives in Europe, never lost the imprint of their place of birth. If Carpentier believed that an artist's *americanismo* was something that he was born with—a function of birthplace, ancestry, and nationality—it is no wonder that he found it necessary to conceal his Swiss birth and invent a *nodriza* from whom he could imbibe Spanish.[5]

When did Carpentier actually move to Cuba and learn the language? In the absence of reliable firsthand accounts from people who knew him during his childhood and adolescence, it hardly seems possible to give a definitive response. We know that by 1922, when he was in his late teens, he was registered at the University of Havana and was publishing essays and reviews in Cuban newspapers. But we do not know how much of his childhood he spent on the island. When González Echevarría asserted, in *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home,* that Carpentier had lived in Europe between 1912 and 1921, the novelist corrected him, alleging that during this period, "the most important in his life," which had "marked" him forever, he not only lived in Cuba but also spent his days among Cuban peasants, to the point that he ended up speaking Spanish like them: "y acabé, literalmente, por hablar su lenguaje" ("La nacionalidad" 82). (As González Echevarría adds wryly, anyone who ever heard Carpentier speak would have reason to doubt this assertion.) Carpentier makes the same point in other places: "Nada más falso," he said in a 1975 lecture, than the belief that he received his early schooling in France. "La gran verdad es que hice mis primeras letras en Cuba" (*Obras* 13: 142).

According to Carpentier's version of his life, his only firsthand acquaintance with France before 1928, when he left Cuba because of the Machado dictatorship, occurred in 1913, during a trip to Europe with his parents. The purpose of the trip, which lasted less than a year, was to collect an inheritance left by his maternal grandfather, who had owned oil wells in Baku. During their stay in Paris, his parents enrolled Alejo in the Parisian Lycée Jeanson de Sailly. But the inheritance turned out to be much less than anticipated, and in less than a year, the family returned to Cuba: "Mi padre nos llevó con la esperanza de toparnos con una gran herencia, pero le tocó justo para pagarnos el viaje" (Chao 244). This trip was the reason, according to Carpentier, that some in Cuba thought that he had been educated in Paris, a widespread mistake whose origin he attributes to a well-meaning but misinformed friend.[6]

Although plausible, the story of the European trip raises some questions. Carpentier liked to stress that his father had done well in Cuba, so much so that soon after his son's birth, Georges bought the large farm—"una gran propiedad en las afueras de La Habana" (Chao 243)—where Alejo grew up. If this is so, it is strange that Carpentier would say that the inheritance paid for their return trip to Cuba, as it suggests that he and his parents would otherwise have been fored to remain in Europe. Another intriguing detail appears in an early Carpentier publication, "Meditaciones carnavalescas," an article published in 1923 under his mother's name, where the author states that he (or she) had been present at the Parisian carnivals of 1912. As Sergio Chaple points out, this might simply be a mistake on Carpentier's part. The carnival could have been held the following year, when the family was in Europe (Chaple 8–9). The other possibility, however, is that Carpentier lived in France until 1912 (or 1913), when—perhaps as a result of an inheritance—the family was able to emigrate to Cuba. It may well be true that, as Carpentier insists to González Echevarría, he lived in Cuba during the decisive years between 1912 and 1921. But it may also be true that he did not set foot in Cuba until

1912, when he was eight years old—which would explain his French accent, as well as his mastery of a language that, if one is to believe him, he studied formally only for three months.

This conjecture finds support in a penetrating, if rather scathing, assessment of Carpentier's first novel, *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!* (1933), by Juan Marinello, who had known Carpentier since the early 1920s when they were active in the Grupo Minorista. Labeling Carpentier "escritor cubano-francés," Marinello praises the novel's technical mastery but finds that Carpentier's "extranjería" prevents him from drawing an accurate portrait of Afro-Cuban culture (*Literatura hispanoamericana* 168). Marinello adds: "Si para muchos cubanos blancos, y aun para para algún cubano negro, la intimidad afrocriolla en sus valores más definidos, es teatro y pintoricidad ¿no habría de serlo para un adolescente nacido en la vieja cultura, y que había ido hacia lo negro como a una fiesta de los sentidos y a una prueba de capacidades urbanas?" (171). Granted, "nacido en la vieja cultura" might refer to Carpentier's European heritage rather than to his literal place of birth. A few paragraphs later, however, Marinello again intimates that Carpentier was born abroad:

> Es cierto que la angustia colectiva y la urgente preocupación del mañana, hijas de una espantable deformación económica, no estaban potentes como ahora en los días en que Carpentier se puso en trato con lo cubano. Entonces nos punzaba el presentimiento de la tragedia pero no se imponía con la enérgica violencia de ahora; el ánimo inquisitivo, como el propósito artístico, andaba muy distraído de brillos formales. Alejo Carpentier, como su hijo Menegildo, no tuvo tiempo sino para pasear la atención por un panorama poderoso de solicitaciones sensuales. *Pero él está unido a Cuba por el cordón de su rica adolescencia.* Sabe, desde su París literario y musical, con igual precisión que si no hubiera salido de las librerías de la Calle del Obispo, la carrera de nuestro espíritu y su mudanza. (176; emphasis added)

Marinello's choice of words is revealing, for he pointedly suggests that what ties Carpentier to Cuba is not his umbilical cord but the "cordón de su rica adolescencia." Had Carpentier been born and raised in Cuba, this would surely have been known to Marinello. More likely, Marinello knew (or suspected) that Carpentier had come to Cuba sometime during his childhood; it was then that Carpentier "se puso en trato con lo cubano," another phrase that suggests a foreign birth and subsequent arrival on the island. This is why, when Marinello says that Carpentier "Vivió entre nosotros largos años" (168), the sentence excludes him from the national collectivity designated by the "nosotros."[7]

It could be the case, then, that Carpentier, with his Swiss birth and French or European schooling, did not emigrate to Cuba until he was eight or nine years old.[8] González Echevarría's 1977 intuition that Carpentier "is a Latin American writer for whom Spanish is as close to being a foreign language as any since Garcilaso de la Vega" (*Alejo Carpentier* 30) may well prove to be more literally true than he intended. It is important to underscore that the issue is not Carpentier's literary nationality or his mastery of Spanish. Carpentier belongs to Cuban literature as surely as the Polish-born Joseph Conrad does to English literature or the Spanish-born George Santayana does to American literature. Santayana did not know a word of English until he was twelve years old. Conrad was twenty when he started to learn the language in which he would write his novels (the first of which, *Almayer's Folly,* he began scarcely ten years after his first exposure to English). Yet both are superb stylists—as is Nabokov, for that matter. Steiner has even argued that these writers' virtuosity has something to do with English not being their native language. For support, he quotes Theodor Adorno's statement that only a writer who is not truly at home in a language can use it as an instrument (15). Although Adorno exaggerates, it is nevertheless true that writers who come late to their medium develop a heightened sensitivity to its shape and texture. To such writers—and Carpentier is one—the language of their work is not only a means of expression but a prized possession, a gift, something to be examined, admired, caressed, played with.

Like Conrad, who was reluctant to discuss how and when he learned English, Carpentier shied away from talking about the genesis of his bilingualism. (Questions about one's tongue ties are embarrassingly intimate.) But Carpentier did not have to talk about his tongue ties, because the fiction of a Cuban birth simplified a much more complicated situation. On several occasions, he did speak about the relative merits of French and Spanish. In a 1975 lecture, "Problemática del tiempo y el idioma en la moderna novela hispanoamericana," he recalls his decision to become a writer:

> En 1928, cuando por razones políticas tuve que instalarme en París por un tiempo largo (estaba desterrado y no sabía cuándo iba a regresar a mi patria), resultó que mi conocimiento del francés me fue de gran ayuda para poder publicar artículos en diarios y revistas. Entonces se me presentó un dilema: escribir en francés o escribir en español. No vacilé un solo minuto: escribir en francés aquello que me ayudaba a vivir—artículos, ensayos, reportajes que publicaba en la prensa—, pero lo que era mío, lo que era mi expresión, lo que era mi literatura, lo escribía en castellano. (*Obras* 13: 201)

Carpentier frames his bilingualism as diglossia, the linguists' term for use of separate languages in different contexts and for different purposes (Fishman). But his distinction is not entirely borne out by the facts. If it is true that Carpentier spent the first seventeen years of his life on a farm in Cuba and that his only formal contact with French was having attended a lycée for three months when he was nine years old, one wonders how it was possible for his French to be good enough so that, in 1928, fifteen years after his only visit to France, he was faced by the "dilemma" of choosing between the two languages. In addition, he forgets or ignores that one of his first extended pieces of fiction, "Histoire de lunes" (1933), was written in French, as were his *Poèmes des Antilles* (1931) and other early texts. Indeed, almost as soon as he arrived in Paris, Carpentier began to write "literature" in French, which suggests that the choice of Spanish was not as automatic as he later recalled.[9] Finally, Carpentier's diglossic scenario—French as the language of his livelihood and Spanish as the language of his art—is belied by the fact that during his Paris years, Carpentier did most of his for-profit writing in Spanish for Cuban magazines such as *Carteles* and *Social*.

But these oversights or suppressions are, in some sense, beside the point, for the real thrust of the statement is not biographical. By stating that he chose Spanish to express what was most personal—"lo que era mío, lo que era mi expresión"—Carpentier underscores the privileged place of Spanish in his life—as he did when, in the acceptance speech for the Premio Cervantes, he stated that as a boy, he used to play "at the foot of a statue of Cervantes"[10]—another biographically dubious assertion. With statements like these, which tailor his "bio" to his vita, he is stressing that, although he may have known more than one language, he had only one tongue. In the 1975 lecture, after making this point, Carpentier contrasts his situation with that of Paul Lafargue and José María de Heredia, Cubans who wrote in French:

> En cuanto a mí, preferí el castellano, rotundamente, por ser cubano de esta época y porque estimo que es un idioma espléndido, de una flexibilidad, de una riqueza, de unos recursos literarios incomparables y sobre todo porque el castellano ofrece facilidades extraordinarias al prosista y al poeta, en cuanto a la posibilidad de jugar con la frase, con los verbos, de verbalizar sustantivos, en fin de hacer estallar el idioma cuando hace falta. Se inventa una palabra en castellano, se transforma un sustantivo en verbo, y el idioma admite de tal manera esos juegos que todo el mundo entiende y nadie encuentra que una frase sea oscura porque en ella haya un verbo insólito inventado por el escritor. Con el castellano puede hacerse todo. No así con el francés, que es un idioma terriblemente sometido a reglas, a una suerte de lógica cartesiana de la gramática misma, de la sintaxis, de la estructura, tanto que a pesar de los esfuerzos hechos en estos últimos años por escritores como Queneau, como Céline y otros por hacer estallar el idioma, esto no se logra y se vuelve siempre al francés desde el siglo XVII. (*Obras* 13: 203)

It is hardly surprising that Carpentier found a liberty in his adopted tongue that he did not believe existed in his first language. Although Carpentier is certainly not alone in chafing against the rigidity of French, Racine's tongue happened to be also that of Georges, the father who left the family. Unfettered from painful family history, Spanish for Carpentier was somewhat like

English for Santayana: a loose tongue, one beyond the purview of paternal authority (Pérez Firmat, *Tongue Ties* 28–29). Writing in French, Carpentier remained inside his father's library, the source of the books that he read as a child. As he said to Hector Bianciotti, he always felt "a little imprisoned" in French (*Entrevistas* 273). But in Spanish, he could do as he pleased. I suspect that it was French, the language of the law, of the "terrible" subjection to rules, that Carpentier really wanted to blow up (the phrase is Beckett's), but either it seemed to him bombproof—the lesson he drew from Queneau and Céline—or the emotional cost of linguistic parricide was too high. Neither his father's nor his mother's tongue, Spanish gave him a license to kill; that is, to reinvent himself, to shed one identity and assume another. If it is true, as he claimed, that he wrote in Spanish because he was Cuban, it is no less true that he became Cuban by writing in Spanish.

In the recent book *Unhomely Rooms*, Roberto Ignacio Díaz has convincingly demonstrated that Spanish American literature includes a rich tradition of "heterolingual" writing that includes the Inca Garcilaso, the Countess Merlin, María Luisa Bombal, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and many others. Carpentier belongs to a different and much less populated tradition. Typically the Spanish American heterolingual writer leaves Spanish for another European tongue (usually French or English) that promises enhanced prestige and visibility. Traveling in the opposite direction, Carpentier abandoned the metropolitan tongue for a peripheral vernacular, Latin American Spanish. Although this move distanced him from the cultural center, it made available a medium that, in his view, remained fresh and unencumbered. Carpentier chose Spanish for the same reason that he wrote about "marvelous American reality" and that his father emigrated to Cuba: because it offered the possibility of inaugural achievement. In *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), the narrator, after learning about Santa Mónica de los Venados, the village in the heart of the South American jungle, remarks: "el Adelantado ha fundado una ciudad. No me canso de repetírmelo [. . .] Fundar una ciudad. Yo fundo una ciudad. Él ha fundado una ciudad. Es posible conjugar semejante verbo" (251). What the Adelantado accomplished in deeds Carpentier sought to accomplish in words, and only Spanish allowed him to conjugate the verb.

Describing the mission of the Latin American novelist, Carpentier liked to compare him to the biblical Adam, who had the power to name the creatures around him.[11] The analogy calls attention to the act (and art) of naming, to the writer's ability to attach words to things or events that had heretofore gone nameless. To baptize the birds of the air and beasts of the field, however, Adam first had to invent their names. Adam the name-giver depends on Adam the word-maker, the neologizer. At least in part because Spanish was not an inherited language, Carpentier thought of it as neological, a medium no less fresh and malleable than the New World that he wanted to re-create in his novels. This is the impression one forms from his remarks on the flexibility of Spanish, its receptiveness to new coinages and wordplay. When he asserts, "deliberadamente escogí el castellano y [. . .] prefiero el castellano a cualquier otro idioma" (*Obras* 13: 203–04), an aesthetic calculation underlies the loyalty oath. Better to be a founder than a follower. Better to neologize than to reword. Rather than becoming another belated epigone in French, he cast his lot with a language and a literature in which, as he said about his father's view of Cuba, "todo estuviera por hacer" ("Autobiografía de urgencia" 3).

Carpentier did not always portray his use of Spanish as a matter of choice, however. Sometimes he explained his decision by pointing out that his French was insufficient for literary composition. In a 1963 interview, he states that after writing a few things in French "por pura casualidad" when he was young, he realized that his French was inadequate:

> Me di cuenta de que en realidad esa no era la lengua en la cual yo podía expresarme, porque había aprendido el francés de una manera totalmente mecánica, lo había hablado con mi padre en la casa, un poquito en el colegio donde nos hacían hablar en francés, un rato todos los días: es uno de los idiomas que se aprenden en el bachillerato de Cuba; pero nunca había estudiado la gramática ni la estructura del idioma. [. . .] Creo que lo esencial, en el oficio de escritor, es dominar sus propios materiales y su instrumento de trabajo: el instrumento de trabajo en este caso es la lengua, y yo nunca he sentido, en francés, la seguridad que encuentro al trabajar con el español. (*Entrevistas* 81)

Because Carpentier claims that he never had much exposure to French, the "dilemma" expounded in "Problemática del tiempo y el idioma en la moderna novela hispanoamericana" evaporates (*Obras* 13: 201). Nonetheless, his perception of inadequacy is not incompatible with the remarks about the rigidity of French, because the stricter the controls inherent to a language, the greater the resources needed by the writer who wishes, as Derrida once put it, to make something happen to his tongue. Carpentier continues:

> Además, el español es una lengua magnífica, en el sentido de que es la que deja el máximo de libertad al escritor, sin que sus atrevimientos parezcan como incorrecciones. Uno inventa una palabra en francés, por ejemplo, y resulta chocante, extraña, asombrosa, ridícula. Uno puede inventar palabras en español y todo el mundo las comprende, aunque no estén en los diccionarios. (*Entrevistas* 81)

Just as Carpentier equivocated about his accent, either attributing it to a speech impediment or acknowledging that it was the residue of childhood French, he equivocated about the reasons for using Spanish as his literary medium. At times, he emphasized that because he knew French "perfectly" (*Entrevistas* 227), he could have become a francophone writer. At other times, he said that he had no choice, given his "mechanical" knowledge of French. Behind these conflicting accounts may lie insecurity about all of his languages. Afraid to make mistakes—*incorrecciones*—Carpentier chooses the medium in which he believes that they go unnoticed; that is, the medium in which his linguistic superego is less harsh. In this instance, security and freedom go hand in hand. His sense of security in Spanish arises as much from the absence of paternal controls as from his superior command of the language.

And yet, although Carpentier insistently claimed Spanish as his "propio idioma," a central work in his corpus, *Los pasos perdidos,* suggests that he never succeeded in this effort. Of his novels, *Los pasos perdidos* is the only one overtly concerned with the issue of tongue ties, because its plot turns on the protagonist-narrator's recovery of Spanish, his mother tongue. Living in New York City, before his journey to South America in search of musical instruments, he reveals that he has all but forgotten Spanish, "el idioma que nunca usaba, aunque sólo podía multiplicar en español y sumar con el 'llevo tanto'" (*Los pasos perdidos* 77). A few days later, on the plane that takes him to the South American capital, Spanish suddenly returns to him when he hears the pilot's voice over the intercom. The scene is one of the most dramatic in the book:

> Me sentía preso, secuestrado, cómplice de algo execrable, en este encierro del avión, con el ritmo de tres tiempos, oscilante, de la envergadura empeñada en lucha contra un viento adverso que arrojaba, a veces, una tenue lluvia sobre el aluminio de las alas. Pero ahora, una rara voluptuosidad adormece mis escrúpulos. Y una fuerza me penetra lentamente por los oídos, por los poros: el idioma. He aquí pues, el idioma que hablé en mi infancia; el idioma en que aprendí a leer y solfear; el idioma enmohecido en mi mente por el poco uso, dejado de lado como herramienta inútil, en país donde poco pudiera servirme. (108)

For my purposes, the crucial phrase in this passage is the deictic, "He aquí," which points in two directions: toward the sounds that the protagonist hears through the loudspeaker and toward the words on the page, which include the deictic sentence itself. The problem is that the deictic is misleading, because the narrator could not have written these words in the language in which we are reading them. As he admits, when he boards the plane to fly back to North America, he loses Spanish once again. A quotation in English from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* marks the exact moment when the loss takes place:

> De espaldas a mí habla nuevamente el piloto. Y lo que dice, que siempre es lo mismo, despierta en mí el recuerdo de otros versos del poema: *I heard the sound of voices; not the voice which I gave forth.* El idioma de los hombres del aire, que fue mi idioma durante años, desplaza en mi mente, esta mañana, el idioma matriz—el de mi madre, el de Rosario. Apenas si puedo pensar en español, como había vuelto a hacerlo, ante la sonoridad de vocablos que ponen la confusión en mi ánimo. (*Los pasos perdidos* 292; emphasis in original)

As he journeys between North and South America, the narrator crosses a linguistic border, a barrier of sound and sense that delimits the domain of his languages. Once outside South America, he is incapable even of thinking in his mother tongue: "Apenas si puedo pensar en español." Yet, he gives his account in the very language that has supposedly been removed from his mind. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a linguistic antinomy at the heart of *Los pasos perdidos*: throughout the narrative, Carpentier's protagonist refers to Spanish as a language different from that in which he is telling his story ("El lenguaje secreto"). So wrenchingly self-conscious about his thoughts and feelings, he seems unaware only of his own words. In the jungle, thinking about composing the Threnody from a Spanish translation of the *Odyssey,* he hesitates because of the limitations this would entail: "Nunca había pensado en componer música para poema alguno escrito en ese idioma que, por sí mismo, constituiría un eterno obstáculo a la ejecución de una obra coral en cualquier gran centro artístico" (*Los pasos perdidos* 277). "Ese idioma," he says, as if Spanish were a language other than that in which the sentence is uttered.

This blind spot, I believe, has its origins in Carpentier's linguistic predicament. For the narrator, Spanish is a virtual mother tongue, present in his reflections rather than in his discourse. Although he can write lyrically about the significance of Spanish in his life, he perceives no connection between Spanish and the actual words that he uses to express himself. Whatever he may say about his attachment to his "idioma matriz," in his language practice Spanish is no more than a self-effacing and affectless esperanto, the antithesis of a mother tongue. This disconnection between pronouncements and practice undermines his claims of nativeness. There is a kind of *nodriza*-effect at work here. No less than Carpentier, his protagonist devises a scenario of linguistic rootedness that, plausible as it may look, is fundamentally incoherent. If a mother tongue is the site where culture becomes nature, neither Carpentier nor his protagonist has managed to "naturalize" his relation to Spanish.[12] The narrator asks himself: "¿Cuál era mi idioma verdadero?" (*Los pasos perdidos* 277). As we have seen, Carpentier asked himself the same question, and, like his character, he was unable to answer it. Even as *Los pasos perdidos* dramatizes the protagonist's yearning for a mother tongue, for an *idioma verdadero,* it exposes this desire as unsatisfiable.

In an early extended discussion of Carpentier's fiction, Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann remark that the narrator of *Los pasos perdidos* exhibits a "morbid fascination with words," "a kind of gluttony" that results in a "sickly obesity" (55). Although one may not agree with the negative cast of this comment—the critic's gluttony may be the artist's *bon appétit*—it is undeniable that verbosity is a hallmark of Carpentier's literary style. As he explained in "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso" (1975), the density of his prose arises from the *horror vacui* that underlies baroque aesthetics (*Obras* 13: 172). Every word is a "núcleo proliferante" that spawns other words until each page, each chapter, becomes an imposing block of print—thickets of words that, at times, seem almost as impenetrable as the South American jungle.

To this account, I would add that verbosity, that extraordinary flood of words that runs through *Los pasos perdidos* and Carpentier's other novels, is also a symptom of the fear of tonguelessness. The protracted lists, the labyrinthine sentences, the layering of detail on detail—these too are ways of taking possession of the language. What better proof of ownership or belonging than knowing all the words? The hitch, however, is that the link between word and tongue is not synecdochal. A tongue is always more (or less) than the sum of its words. Just as one can have a mother tongue that one cannot speak fluently, it is possible to master the intricacies of a language without making it one's own. Although I would not label Carpentier's fascination with words a "neurotic defense mechanism," (55) as Harss and Dohmann do, a defense mechanism it is, one designed to shield him from tonguelessness. Gluttony may be a hedge against deprivation. Is not Carpentier's invention of the *nodriza*, a symbolic source of nourishment, an acknowledgment of need? Is there not something profoundly elegiac, something in the manner of a baroque funeral oration, in Carpentier's copiousness? The *horror vacui* that haunts his novels is a wordless void.

In one of his last interviews, Carpentier mentions that when he was young, his French accent gave him "un cierto complejo" (*Entrevistas* 446). His last novel, *El arpa y la sombra* (1979), written when Carpentier was suffering from the cancer that would take his life, issues a final statement on the causes of this complex, which reach beyond his guttural r's. As several critics have pointed out, Carpentier's Columbus is also Columbus's Carpentier: reviewing his life on his deathbed, America's discoverer doubles for the author, who regarded novelists like himself as the continent's literary discoverers. In the words of González Echevarría, Columbus's confession is "un balance y despedida, que contiene, como en clave, una apología por las mentiras de Carpentier sobre su nacimiento" ("La nacionalidad" 78).[13]

In this light, Columbus's remarks about language are revealing. About to translate a passage from Seneca, he says, "Tomo una pluma y traduzco, según mi entender, en el castellano que aún manejo con alguna torpeza" (*El arpa y la sombra* 73). Later, lamenting the difficulty of describing American nature, he complains that his Spanish is not better than it is: "Un retórico, acaso, que manejara el castellano con mayor soltura que yo; un poeta, acaso, usando de similes y metáforas, hubiesen ido más allá, logrando describir lo que yo no podía describir: esos árboles, muy enmarañados, cuyas trazas me eran ignoradas" (115). He even retracts the Adamic metaphor that plays so central a part in Carpentier's aesthetics: "no era yo un Nuevo Adán, escogido por su Criador, para poner nombres a las cosas" (115). Masked by the Genoese sailor, Carpentier owns up to his "complex" with a transparency that he never achieved in his own voice.

Most distinctively Carpenterian, however, is Columbus's unwillingness to allow feelings of inadequacy to silence him. Immediately after admitting that he lacks the words to describe the New World, he launches into a dazzling description of precisely those trees that he says he cannot name, a characteristic Carpenterian tour de force that drowns any insecurities in a glittering torrent of words. As *Los pasos perdidos* makes clear, tongues may fail, but words never do—"Grandes, hermosas, enjundiosas, jugosas, ricas palabras" (*El arpa y la sombra* 154). For Columbus, the proliferation of words hides the absence of gold: "rich" words replace other kinds of riches. For Carpentier, words hide the absence of something just as precious: a mother tongue. Bearing out Steiner's contention that many of the masterworks of twentieth-century literature were produced by writers working in a non-native language, Carpentier's fiction is a perverse Babel, a monument not to the multiplication of tongues but to the specter of tonguelessness.

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1. See Baquero, Cabrera Infante, González Echevarría ("La nacionalidad"), Padilla, Santí (who interviewed Carpentier's first wife), and Wakefield (6). In a monograph on Cubans who have been nominated for the Nobel Prize, the Cuban historian Gregorio Delgado García reveals that Carpentier's transcript at the University of Havana indicates that he was born in Lausanne (and gives his mother's surname as "Blagoobrasoff"). Because the information on the transcript must have come from the young Carpentier, Delgado García's find leads one to ask at what point in his life Carpentier began claiming that he had been born on Maloja, "una de las calles más habaneras de La Habana" (*Obras* 14: 121). The earliest reference to Maloja that I have located occurs in "Autobiografía de urgencia," published in January 1965. Another question is why Carpentier chose Maloja rather than some other street in Havana as his birthplace. Could it be because there is also a Maloja in Switzerland?

2. "[Mi padre] llegó a Cuba en 1902, y debo decir que su vida estuvo muy asociada al surgimiento y crecimiento de La Habana, porque, aunque La Habana ya en esa época era una gran ciudad, aún no se conocía allí cierta arquitectura moderna. Mi padre, que era arquitecto, construyó algunos de los edificios más importantes de La Habana de esa época" (*Entrevistas* 72).

3. I follow here the distinction made in *Tongue Ties* between a "language" and a "tongue" (14–20). Whereas a language is a means of expression and communication, a tongue is a personal possession, an organ as much as a faculty. Relations of language kinship pass through the tongue.

4. It is not clear whether by *nodriza* Carpentier means "wet nurse" or "nursemaid." Although by the early 1900s the practice of employing wet nurses had become less common, the anecdote is more credible if he is using *nodriza* in this sense. In an interview in French, he refers to this woman as his *nourrice* (Bianciotti 7). Behind Carpentier's assertion that he heard his first words from his *nodriza* lies a long history of belief and custom regarding the influence of nurses on their charges' language skills. Early medical writers often recommended that a wet nurse should possess distinct, correct speech, because she was the person from whom the child learned to speak (Fildes 173).

5. What of Carpentier's explicitly fictional *nodrizas?* In *El siglo de las luces* (1962), Victor Hughes describes his "nodriza martiniqueña, negra, de las negras de verdad, que había sido como una anunciación de sus rumbos futuros" (*Obras* 5: 52). In *El acoso* (1956), the protagonist's *nodriza*, now an old woman, agonizes in the rundown colonial mansion in which he takes refuge. For the hunted man, she evokes his idyllic childhood, "Paradise before the Fall" (*Obras* 3: 114).

6. "Aunque muchas biografías mías suelen decir que yo fui educado en París y que recibí mis primeras letras en la capital de Francia, esto es totalmente incierto. Ello se debe al noble error de un amigo mío que, queriendo llamar la atención sobre mí en el año 1927, cuando me hallaba

encarcelado por mis actividades políticas en Cuba, tuvo que hacer una biografía y sin poder consultarme y sin tener elementos a mano, lanzó esta idea de que el acento este que tengo—y que ustedes oyen, y que no es solamente mío, puesto que un gran novelista contemporáneo de nuestro continente, comparte conmigo la característica de esta 'erre' atravesada que tenemos–, este amigo mío imaginó que yo había sido educado en Francia" (*Obras* 13: 142). The other Latin American novelist is surely Julio Cortázar, who was born in Brussels. I have not been able to track down the "biography" to which Carpentier refers.

7. At the time Marinello published this review (1937), Carpentier was living in France, safely removed from the political turmoil in Cuba. Marinello's animus is no doubt motivated in part by Carpentier's decision to remain in Paris (what he calls "su París literario y musical") even after the dictator Machado had been deposed. Some twenty years later, in "Sobre el asunto en la novela" (1959), Marinello expresses similar reservations about *El acoso*. Likening the novella to "una piedra tallada lejos de su cantera," he complains that the characters bear no relation to the environment in which they move: "Son individuos que resbalan ágilmente, elegantemente, sobre un cubanismo hecho de alusiones literarias" (231, 232). Curiously, these cavils do not recur in the congratulatory speech that Marinello delivered on the occasion of Carpentier's seventieth birthday ("Feliz jubileo"). But by then, Carpentier had become an ornament of the Cuban Revolution and Marinello one of its supporters.

8. In *La maleta perdida,* Marta Rojas relates that, among the contents of an old suitcase belonging to Carpentier that was found in Paris in the 1980s, there was a copy of Charles Richet's *Historia de las sociedades humanas,* a book that was given to "Alexis Carpentier" as a school prize by the head of the Colegio Mimó in Havana. The inscription bears the date 30 November 1914. If Rojas's account is reliable, this is the earliest "sighting" of Carpentier in Cuba. He was nine years old at the time. Both the date and the dedication to "Alexis" are consistent with the conjecture that Carpentier and his parents arrived on the island sometime around 1912. According to Carpentier, one of the structures that his father designed was the electrical plant at Tallapiedra, which was built in 1914 ("Desarrollo de la electricidad en Cuba"). The author thanks Lesbia Orta Varona of the University of Miami Libraries' Cuban Heritage Collection for locating the information about Tallapiedra.

9. For an enlightening discussion of Carpentier's francophone writing, see Birkenmaier 27–48, 79–85. According to Birkenmaier, these poems and stories, most of which deal with Afro-Cuban culture, deliberately expose the difficulties of "intercultural translation" (84).

10. "De niño, yo jugaba al pie de una estatua de Cervantes que hay en La Habana, donde nací. De viejo hallo nuevas enseñanzas, cada día, en su obra inagotable" (*Obras* 13: 333).

11. In "Problemática de la actual novela hispanoamericana" (1964), Carpentier states that the task of the Latin American novelist is "una labor de definición, de ubicación, que es la de Adán nombrando las cosas" (*Obras* 13: 25). In *Los pasos perdidos,* the protagonist says that Latin America imposes on the artist "la tarea de Adán poniéndole nombre a las cosas" (*Obras* 2: 197). In *Tristán e Isolda en Tierra Firme*, "Como hiciera el Adán de William Blake, comencemos por nombrar nuestras cosas para que nuestras cosas sean" (23). Other similar passages can be found in his writings and interviews.

12. For this characterization of a mother tongue, see Ramaswamy (1–19).

13. On *El arpa y la sombra* as covert autobiography, see also Chase and Bockus-Aponte.

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