

The Reworking of the Hero Myth in the Lost Steps

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Humankind has moved away from the great myths that informed the public, personal and social spheres of life. Globalization has ironically further driven individuals into solitudes, more impenetrable and demanding of means for negotiation. Societies have moved away from a communal to a more individualistic manner of living. In the process, we have lost the meanings of rituals and mythic practices which bound communities together. Myths which offered pointers for the conscious into the unconscious, for society and hence for the individual, have been found empty by the modern man. Hence when the character-narrator of *The Lost Steps* bemoans, “I am Empty. Empty! Empty!” [1], the reader identifies the *doppelgänger* he represents not only for Alejo Carpentier, but also for the modern man.

The Lost Steps (*Los Pasos Perdidos*, 1953) is mostly set in the jungles of Latin America by the banks of the river Orinoco. The author refuses to spatialise the initial chapters, before the character sets out on his journey, as they “do not call for any specific location”; probably because the character at least metaphorically occupies a space dwelt in by much of humanity, irrespective of geography, race or religion. *The Lost Steps* traces the journey of the unnamed character narrator in search of musical instruments, used by the aboriginal tribes still in existence in the primordial jungles of South America. The character, battling demons of a meaningless marriage, and doubled over beneath the Sisyphian boulder of routine and buried dreams, undertakes the trip reluctantly. The journey takes on mythical proportions and traces the pattern of the hero quest told many times over across cultures and histories.

The paper attempts to explore the manner in which the quest is traced by Carpentier in the novel, utilizing the diving board of the heterogeneity of Latin American culture and mythology, thus bringing together strands of belief systems which vitalized worlds which were historically sundered beyond unification, in the pre-Columbian era. The novel brings together Christian, European, African and Native American stories which fuse together into the South American. It offers a unique possibility and manner of storytelling impelled by a reality which is non-linear and strange to the uninitiated. The cultural admixture and colonial violence have rewritten and shaped a reality which offers up different stories to be told. The truth that can be gleaned bears testimony to what Joseph Campbell stated as the need of the times, the need for myths of the planet, not myths of a nation or a society or a religion, but myths which can take one out of the confines prescribed by one’s religion or societal mores.

All the elements of what Joseph Campbell terms the monomyth can be traced in *The Lost Steps*. The “call to adventure”[2] comes to the character by way of the curator of the Museum of Organography, into whom the character bumps while he aimlessly wanders the streets, metaphorically shackled to time. The curator assigns him with the task of journeying into the jungles of South America in search of instruments used by certain tribes, which imitate the sound of birds. The discovery of the instruments would prove the character’s “theory of *mimetism-magic-rhythm*” [3], as the origin of music. The curator comes across as a benign God-figure, anticipating his needs and bestowing timely redemption signifying the summons of destiny, to uproot the hero from his zone of comfort to unimaginable trials and impossible triumphs. Tied down to the daily necessities of the world that he lived in, the character refuses to answer the call just as King Minos refused to slaughter the bull, or the infantile ego refuses to break free of parental security. The tentacles of time offer a sense of false permanence to the temporal.

The hero myths mostly feature a man. In the structure of the monomyth, however, women occupy critical spots in advancing or negating the hero’s quest for truth. The hero’s heroism is realized and sustained by the woman figure in the form of a mother or lover. She may also figure as a temptress whose seductive powers the hero endures and overcomes. Woman occupies the role of the teacher and guide probably because as bearer of life, life has bestowed on her an intuitive understanding of it. Hence it is Ariadne’s thread that leads Theseus out of the the labyrinth, and it is Virgin Mary who bears Christ and whose agony equals that of Christ on the cross.

Joseph Campbell in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* positions woman in mythology thus:

“Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation.”[4]

Hence it is to Rosario that he clings in his hour of trial and it is she who points out to him that Mouche does not fit into the picture of his life that was unfolding as he advanced on his journey. The temptress in the figure of Mouche who is blind to the significations implied in the quest, ironically eggs the character on to the journey which has been foretold by a set of stars whose directions she is illiterate to. It was her idea that the instruments could be tailor made at the neighbourhood shop which artlessly mimicked art in any shape.

The character narrator, as pointed out by Timothy Brennan in the *Introduction* to the novel, is “a version of Carpentier himself—at least some doppelgänger that Carpentier in his own mind, feared he might become”[5]. On reaching the South American continent he passes the first threshold. The function Campbell assigns in the hero quest to the threshold is akin to that assigned by Homi Bhabha to the occupation of threshold spaces. Both hold the potential of creation and the recognition of new identities.

The character’s Latin American identity which he had unconsciously tried to subdue and which had chased Carpentier futilely to Europe come vigorously alive, much like “the roots (that) took advantage of songs and siestas to arch backs, putting an end in twenty days to Le Corbusier’s best functional designs”[6]. The journey of crossing the threshold is a form of self-annihilation, which leads him inward into the discovery of lost or unfound sights and smells. In the Book of Jonah, in the Bible, Jonah undertakes a journey of similar proportions into the belly of the whale, where he spent three days and three nights whence he was transformed enough to pray and to rejoice[7]. Carpentier, much like the other Latin American intellectuals of the time was enamoured by Surrealism and the promise held out by Europe, as a world to get back to only to be disillusioned by both. The character in ‘fleeing’ his roots attempts also to subconsciously live his father’s dream of recovering Europe. The character attains atonement with the father, one of the boons granted the hero, when he rediscovers home in the “hemisphere without history” [8].

The hero is well on his journey along perilous paths for meeting with moments of truth. His journey into the dream landscape of the Latin American jungle is a metaphorical one indicating his journey into his own depths of being. Carpentier creates the magical realist jungle, “the dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms” [9]. The primordial jungle of trials, when set off against the world left behind, sets up contrasting views of two worlds, a modern European one shackled to time and a folk one timeless in thrilling with magic and enchantment. What Jung calls the visionary mode of artistic creation maybe read as a trope for the jungle which figures as the road of trials for the character. In his essay ‘Psychology and Literature’, Jung says,

“It is a primordial experience which passes man’s understanding, and to which his is therefore in danger of succumbing. The value and the force of experience are given by its enormity. It arises from timeless depths; it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque” [10].

Hence the journey into the mythical forest functions to rip open one’s idea of the world as it is and offers a glimpse into the unfathomed. Northrop Frye’s use of the antithesis of light and darkness corresponds to Jungian thought. Frye in his essay ‘The Archetypes of Literature’ recognizes the central myth of literature as the quest myth and posits the light world as

subjecting man to frustration and weakness and the darkness of nature as the sphere in which the 'libido' or the hero self awakes [11].

The character meets the aids on his way to revelation in the form of the company led by Adelentado who alone knew the paths which opened into a microcosm of the world, "sort of like Noah's ark, where all the animals of the earth could fit, but with only one small door"[12]. Having left the Land of Man behind, the character travels through the Land of the Horse, by the aid of which animal, man conquered and controlled great stretches of the world. In the pathless world, in the city bordering the jungle, the Land of the Dog is reached, wherein man and dog must have originally complemented each other in powers, forming a pact of survival. He advances into the Land of the Birds. The bird in most mythologies symbolizes freedom of the spirit from the bondage to the earth and accompanying power. The Indians placed their culture under the sign of the bird as signified in the tiaras of their emperors. There is no escaping the relevance of the aeroplane as the modern bird that weans the character back into the modern world. The transcendental function represented by the animals and birds in relation to man comes alive while the hero traverses these lands.

The character's union with Rosario, the woman, the goddess, is the ultimate boon granted the hero. Campbell states, "The meeting with the goddess (who is incarnate in every woman) is the final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love (charity: *amor fati*), which is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity"[13]. It negates the fragmentation felt by the modern man and unleashes love and charity. The result is the unleashing of his creativity. Parallel myths of the union of man and woman find resonance in the cosmogonic myths of the world.

It is but necessary to complete the cycle of the monomyth that the hero re-emerges from the land of trials into the world, with secrets unknown to the men left behind, like the Buddha or Christ. The character narrator becomes a parable for the modern man enslaved to time and blinded by concerns which take him away from discovering the self. Timothy Brennan in the *Introduction* identifies the novel as Carpentier's way of purging his own past, for "its eloquence comes from the terrified recognition of what he might have been"[14], the composition of which saved him the fate. Having penetrated the puzzle of life, he cannot forever stay embedded in a primordial state of being," because the only human race to which it is forbidden to sever the bonds of time is the race of those who create art"[15]. Hence he must not only move out of yesterday but must also have memories of the future.

Claude Levi Strauss, in *Myth and Meaning* states that "myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him" [16], which has resonance in Jungian archetypes and Platonic ideas.

It is probably that part of man which goes some distance toward explaining the elemental commonality of the hero myth across cultures and civilizations, and archetypes that make up the myths of the world. The story of the great flood and Noah's ark, appears in the novel, the pigeon and the olive branch suitably transformed into a rat and an ear of corn thus, fitting snugly into a different clime. The orality and essential similarity of mythical narrative and the manners of preservation is evidenced in the passage in which Fray Pedro is seen taking down the fragments of a partly forgotten epic poem from the Headman of the Indians who is in a state of intoxicated lucidity. One witnesses the formulation of postcolonial hybridity and multiplicity of identities subsumed in the episode. The choice of quotations used from the Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Psalms from The Bible, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *Popol Vuh*, offer structure to the novel, and their repeated use lends orality and substantiates the essential mythological archetypes running through the novel. That literature is informed by "pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth and folk tale" as Northtop Frye's essay 'The Archetypes of Criticism' shows, is illustrated[17].

The reference to the myth of the robot in *Popol Vuh*, *The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya*, is probably the original cosmogony to anticipate the menace of Frankenstein. It drives home the intensity of wisdom contained in the myths of yore and its applicability in the personal, public and societal life of modern man and of the implications his actions could have on his surroundings. Borges' aphorism on Cervantes and *Don Quixote* could well be applied to Carpentier and *The Lost Steps*. "For in the beginning of literature there is myth, as there is also in the end of it"[18].

In the age of self determinism that we live in, it is not the society that is about to offer guidance; it becomes imperative for every individual to shake off the limitations imposed on him from without, and to seek out much like the character narrator, the road toward destiny which will enlarge to include much more than merely the individual.

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