

**ALEJO CARPENTIER**

*On the Marvelous Real in America*

*Editors' Note*

Alejo Carpentier refers to the German art critic Franz Roh, and contemporary literary critics refer to both Carpentier and Roh as they devise their own theories of magical realism. Perhaps the northern European origins of Roh's formulation and its dissemination in Latin America by the Spanish *Revista de Occidente* served to spur Carpentier to his aggressively American discussion of the mode. In the two essays included here, Carpentier devises his own term, *lo real maravilloso americano*, to describe what he argues is a uniquely American form of magical realism. As opposed to European Surrealism, a movement in which Carpentier had participated in the 1930s in France, Carpentier's "marvelous American reality" does not imply a conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality but, rather, an amplification of perceived reality required by and inherent in Latin American nature and culture. It was Carpentier's conviction, strongly felt by the late thirties, formally codified in 1949 in the first essay included here, and elaborated interartistically in 1975 in the second, that *lo real maravilloso americano* differed decidedly in spirit and practice from European Surrealism. In Latin America, Carpentier argues, the fantastic is not to be discovered by subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations of images. Rather, the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto.

Part of the first essay that we include here served to preface Carpentier's first novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949); we have translated an expanded version of that prologue, which was pub-

lished in 1967 in a collection of Carpentier's essays, *Tientos y diferencias* (Approaches and Distinctions). The second essay was originally given as a lecture in 1975, and collected in 1981 in *La novela hispanoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo* (The Hispanic American Novel on the Eve of a New Century).

I  
*Là-bas tout n'est que luxe, calme et volupté.* Invitation to a voyage. Something remote. Something distant or different. *La langoureuse Asie et la brulante Afrique* of Baudelaire. . . . I'm back from the People's Republic of China. I became aware of Peking's very real beauty, its black houses and intensely orange ceramic tiled roofs where fabulous domestic fauna romp: small guardian dragons, curled griffins, graceful zoological household gods whose names I haven't learned. I lingered, astonished, in one of the patios of the Summer Palace, in front of stones mounted and displayed on pedestals, to be contemplated as art objects. They affirm absolutely a notion of *nonfigurative* art that is ignored in declarations of principles by nonfigurative Western artists: a magnification of Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, a hymn of textures and fortuitous proportions, a defense of the *right* of the artist—detector of realities—to *choose* certain subjects or materials that have never been touched by human hands, that transcend their own limits with an original beauty that is the beauty of the universe. I have admired Nanjing's architectural subtlety, reserved and yet airy, and Nandang's strong medieval Chinese walls, bordered in white above the austere darkness of the breaker walls. I have lost myself in Shanghai's teeming crowds, those gymnastic, comical crowds who live in a city where the corners are round, in a city unaware of the West's angular corners. I have watched from the city's sea walls for hours as sampans with squared sails passed by; and later, flying above the country at a very low altitude, I was able to understand the enormous role that clouds and haze, motionless fog and mist play in the prodigious imagery of Chinese landscape painting. Contemplating the rice fields and seeing the work of laborers dressed in braided rushes, I also understood the role of the tender greens, pinks, and yellows in Chinese art, and the painter's shading chalks. And yet, in spite of having spent hours at the corner stands where glasses of hot water are served, and at the fish counters watching the fish whose colors blur in the enveloping motion of their lightly fanning fins; after having listened to the stories of storytellers whom I do not understand; after having stood in awe before the beauty and proportions of the Peking museum's masterpiece,

a wondrous armillary sphere that is mounted upon four dragons and portentously combines the harmonious geometry of heavenly bodies with the heraldic curling of telluric monsters; after having visited the old observatories, bristling with amazing apparatus for sidereal measurements, the implications of which elude our Keplerian notions; after having bundled myself up against the somber cold of the great seaports and the almost feminine Pagoda Tower in Shanghai, that enormous and delicate cornucopia of windows and sharp eaves; after having marveled at the clocklike efficiency of the puppet theaters, I return to the West feeling somewhat melancholy. In spite of my deep interest in what I have seen, I am not sure that I have understood. In order to really understand—and not with the passivity of either a simpleton or a tourist, which in fact, I was—it would have been necessary to learn the language, to have clear ideas regarding one of the most ancient cultures in the world: to understand the clear speech of the dragon and the mask. I was greatly entertained, of course, by the incredible acrobatics of the creators of a theater that is classified for Western consumption as *opera*, when it is really nothing less than the chimerical fulfillment of what *total theater* has tried to achieve—an obsession for the most part unsatisfied by our playwrights, directors, and set designers. But the acrobatics of the interpreters of those operas, works that never thought of themselves as *operas*, were merely the complement to a language that will remain inaccessible to me for the rest of my days. They say that Judith Gautier mastered the ability to read Chinese by the age of twenty. (I don't believe she "spoke Chinese," because *Chinese* as such is never spoken; the Peking dialect, for example, is not understood one hundred kilometers outside of Peking, nor does it have anything to do with the picturesque Cantonese language or the semi-meridional dialect of Shanghai, although the written form for all of these languages is the same, so that communication is possible.) But as for me, I know that my remaining years of existence are too few to give me a true and exact understanding of Chinese culture and civilization. For that, I would need an *understanding of texts*, those texts inscribed on the steles that rest upon the stone shells of enormous tortoises—symbols of longevity, I was told—moving without movement, so ancient that no one knows their date of birth, ruling over aqueducts and fields, inhabitants of the outskirts of the great city of Peking.

## II

I'm back from the world of Islam. I felt pleasantly stirred by landscapes so quiet, so well-defined by the hands of pruners and sowers, so for-

eign to any superfluous bit of vegetation — there are only rose bushes and pomegranate trees, watered by some underground source — that in them, I sensed the grace of some of the finest Persian miniatures; yet, truth be known, I now find myself far away from Iran and cannot know with absolute certainty whether the miniatures I recalled had anything to do with all this. I walked through silent streets, losing myself in the labyrinths of windowless houses, escorted by the fabulous smell of mutton fat so characteristic of central Asia. I was amazed by the diverse manifestations of an art that knows how to transform itself and how to play with materials and textures, triumphing over the formidable stumbling block of a prohibition — still very much observed — against depicting human figures. In terms of a love for textures, serene geometrical symmetries and subtle reversals, it seemed to me that Muslim artists showed signs of imagining an inventive abstraction equaled only by the small, marvelous patio inside the temple at Mitla, which one may contemplate in Mexico. (In these cases, true art is rigorously *nonfigurative*, maintaining a lofty distance from the place where polemics are based on tired and worn-out *realisms*). . . . I was acutely aware of the slender minarets, the polychromed mosaics, and the potent sonority of the *gazzl*; the thousand-year-old pre-Koran taste for unleavened bread that falls of its own weight just as it's taken from the baker's oven. I flew over the Aral Sea, so strange, so foreign in its forms, colors, and contours, yet so similar to Baikal Lake, which amazes me with its surrounding mountains, its zoological rarities, with all that those remote places share: extension, limitlessness, repetition, the endless *taiga* exactly like that in our own jungles, the endless Yenisei River, five leagues wide (I quote Vsevolod Ivanov) after rains like those that swell the Orinoco until it also overflows its banks five or six leagues. . . . Upon my return, I was invaded by the great melancholy of one who wanted to understand but understood only partially. To understand the Islamic culture that I had barely glimpsed, I would have had to know one of the languages spoken there, or to have heard of some literary antecedent (something more substantial, to be sure, than *The Rubaiyat* read in Spanish or the wanderings of Aladdin or Sinbad or the music from *Thamar* by Balakirev or *Scheherezade* or *Antar* by Rimski-Korsakov) or be familiar with their philosophy, if indeed any philosophy functions as such in the great gnostic literature of that vast world where certain atavistic principles continue to weigh heavily on minds, even though certain political contingencies have been discarded. But he who yearned for understanding understood only par-

tionally because he never learned the language or languages spoken there. He confronted hermetic tomes in the bookstores, with titles drawn in arcane signs. I would have liked to learn those signs. I felt humiliated by the same ignorance that I feel in Sanskrit or classical Hebrew — languages that, by the way, were not taught in the Latin American universities of my adolescence, where even Greek and Latin were subjects regarded suspiciously by a freshly minted pragmatism that placed them alongside other idle, intellectual pastimes. I was aware, however, that to understand the Romance languages, the Latin American had only to live with them for a few weeks. (I would verify that fact upon my arrival in Bucharest.) Thus, seeing before me the unintelligible signs that were painted every morning across the headlines of the local newspapers, I felt something similar to perpetual discouragement, realizing that life wouldn't give me enough time (do twenty years of study mean one really *knows* the subject?) to arrive at an integrated, well-founded, universal vision of what Islamic culture is in its different parts, forms, geographical dispersions, dialectical differences, etc. I felt diminished by the true greatness of all that I had seen, but this greatness did not give me a report of its exact measurements or its real motives. It did not give me, upon returning from such extensive wanderings, the means to express to my own people what was universal in its roots, presence, and current transformations. For that, I would have had to possess certain indispensable knowledge, certain keys that, in my case and in the case of many others, would have required specialized study, the discipline of virtually an entire lifetime.

### III

On the way back from my long voyage, I found myself in the Soviet Union where, despite my inability to speak the language, my sense of incomprehension was entirely alleviated. The magnificent architecture of Leningrad, at once baroque, Italian, Russian, was pleasing to me before I ever saw it. I knew those columns. I knew those astragals. I knew those monumental arches opening up buildings, reminiscent of Vitruvius and Viñola, and perhaps also of Piranesi; Rastrelli, the Italian architect, had been there after much strolling through Rome. The rostral columns that rose along the Neva were my personal property. The Winter Palace, deeply blue and foaming white, with its Neptunian, aquatic baroque [*barroquismo*], spoke a language well known to me. Over there, over the water, Peter and Paul's Fortress showed me its profile, a domesticated silhouette. And that's not all: Diderot's friend and patroness was Catherine the Great. Miranda,

the Venezuelan precursor of the American Wars of Independence, was Potempkin's friend. Cimarosa lived and composed in Russia. In addition, Moscow University carries the name of Lomonosov, author of "Ode to the Northern Lights," one of the best examples of a certain kind of eighteenth-century poetry, scientific and encyclopedic, qualities that link it—more through its spirit than its style, of course—with Fontenelle and Voltaire. Pushkin made me think of *Boris Godunov*; I revised an unmusical French translation about thirty years ago at the request of a singer who had to play the role at the Columbus Theater in Buenos Aires. Turgenev was Flaubert's friend ("the most foolish man I ever met," he used to say in admiration). I discovered Dostoevsky in an essay by André Gide. I read Tolstoy's stories for the first time around 1920, in an anthology compiled by the Mexican Department of Education. Whether well translated or not, Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* speak to me of Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Leucippus, and even of "the idealist with whom one gets along better than with the stupid materialist." A performance at the Bolshoi (with an equestrian statue of Peter the Great in the scenery) reminds me of a visit to the far rooms with the high ceilings at the Heritage Museum. There, I find myself in the company of Ida Rubinstein in the strange portrait that Serov painted of her, at once affectionate and cruel; and also in the company of Sergei Diaghilev and Anna Pavlova, who—starting in 1915 and returning afterward every year to Havana—showed Cuba the transcendental techniques of classical dance. Continuing along, a vast retrospective exposition of Roerich jumps out at me unexpectedly, Roerich, the set designer and librettist of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, who questioned Western music's principles of composition. . . . In Leningrad, in Moscow, I found once again in the architecture, in the literature, in the theater, a *perfectly intelligible* universe, intelligible despite my own deficiencies in technical and mechanical understanding of what is situated outside my own cultural territory. (How difficult it was for me one day in Peking to understand the reasoning of a Tibetan lama whose intention it was to correlate Tantrism with Marxism, or that extremely intelligent African man who not long ago in Paris spoke to me of magical tribal rites in terms of historical materialism.) I am increasingly convinced that a single lifetime is not enough to learn, understand, explain the fraction of the globe that destiny assigns a man to inhabit—although that conviction does not absolve him of an immense curiosity to see everything beyond the limits of his own horizons. But curiosity is rarely rewarded with complete *understanding*.

## IV

There is no city in Europe, I believe, where the drama of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation has inscribed itself in more lasting and eloquent gestures than in Prague. On the one hand, the hard and heavy-set Tyn Church, bristling with needles, the Bethlehem Chapel with its steep roof dressed in austere, medieval slate tiles, where the vertical and terrible words of Jan Hus would one day resound; on the other hand, the curling, enveloping, almost voluptuous baroque of the Church of Our Savior in the Clementine school at the end of the Charles Bridge, opposite the daring ogives on the other bank, displays a sumptuous jesuitical scenery—more like a theater than a church—populated with saints and apostles, martyrs and doctors, all jumbled together in a choreographed assembly of stoles and miters—bronze on white, dark tones on gold—proclaiming the momentary victory of Rome's Latin over the nationalistic language spoken by the people of Prague, the language of psalms and Taborite hymns. . . . Above, in the citadel, the windows of the famous defenestration; below, on the *Mala Straná*, Waldstein's palace where the last great condottiere had the entire deafening symphony of the Thirty Year's War sculpted on the smooth ceiling of his reception hall, with profuse configurations of bugles, drums and sackbuts jumbled together with the harnesses, plumes, and standards of bellicose allegories. There I can understand better the spirit that led Schiller, in the first part of his famous trilogy, to the strange feat of writing a drama without protagonists in which the characters are referred to as "some Croatsians," "some uhlands," "a bugle player," "a recruit," "a Capuchin," "a noncommissioned officer." But that's not all. Though the Reformation and Counter Reformation are present in the stones of Prague, its buildings and spaces also speak to us of a past forever suspended between the extreme poles of real and unreal, fantastical and verifiable, contemplation and action. We know that Faust, the alchemist, makes his first (imaginary?) appearance in Prague, where future generations would handle Tycho Brache's astronomical instruments, which were exact or nearly so, before visiting the house of that stargazer named Johannes Kepler, not to mention those who searched for the philosopher's stone, those who prepared hermetic mercury—their street is still preserved, complete with retorts and kilns, in the city of Charles the Great. So many things here evoke the legend of the Golem, that automaton forced to work for the benefit of a wise rabbi on the periphery of the Jewish cemetery and the superb synagogues. And the most extraordinary thing

is that the old Jewish cemetery, with its dramatic steles dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, standing side by side, or one behind the other, haphazardly, as though they were up for auction—in a late March that illuminated the Hebraic inscriptions with brushstrokes from the North wind—coexists on equal terms with the narrow Stavovske theater where one day in 1787, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* had its opening night, a Faustian work, a eucharist play [*auto sacramental*] composed, strangely enough, by that genius in an Age of Reason that firmly refused to believe in guests turned to stone, even though quite close by, bronze bishops and doctors danced in the sumptuous theological scenery of the Clementine Church. There are no mute stones in Prague for those who know how to listen. To this listener, from every corner, from every intersection, like Chamisso's character, present in every fortuitous encounter, in every debate that moves from literature to politics, there emerges the still, velvety, shadowless silhouette of Franz Kafka, who "attempted to describe a battle" and without meaning to, gave us—metaphorically, indirectly—the most stupendous sense of Prague's atmosphere, experienced in all its mystery and possibility. In 1911 Kafka says in his *Diary* that he is moved by a vision of stairs to the right of the Czech bridge: he perceives "through a small triangular window" (only in that asymmetric city, where every manifestation of fantastic architecture is to be found, could there be a *triangular window*) all of the grace and the baroque vitality of that flight of stairs ascending toward the illustrious window of the defenestration. . . . From Kafka, leaping into the past in an imaginary, timeless diligence, we arrive in Leipzig. Awaiting us there is the organ behind which Anna Magdalena, greatly moved, discovered that terrible presence, the inspired dragon Johann Sebastian, and we remember that there the Passions were first sung with very few voices and minimal orchestras. These works concern us most directly because for two hundred years they have not stopped growing, swelling with ever greater numbers of musicians, crossing the Atlantic to the shores of America in scores, performances and recordings, their *allegros* suggesting to Héctor Villa-Lobos the name of *bacchianas* for his compositions inspired by the *allegro* (continuous movement, *perpetuum mobile*) of the Brazilian or Bahian rhythms. . . . From Leipzig the imaginary diligence carries us—with its coachman sounding the trumpet that Mozart and even Mörike knew so well—to Goethe's Weimar to the house where monstrous replicas of Greek sculptures await us, sculptures executed in heroic dimensions worthy of being placed in a temple if the

author of *Faust* had not stood them in his scanty Weimer estate in rooms so tiny that house guests were obliged to turn sideways to get past a chessboard. These enormous Greek divinities, helter-skelter and up to their ears in the small rooms in the house in Weimar, remind me of the sort of eponymous rhetoric commonly used in the vestibules of government buildings in Latin America, where presiding statues swell, widen, elevate and exalt heroes to two or three times their actual size, even to the absurd extreme of a Statue of the Republic in the Havana Capital Building with breasts of bronze that weigh a ton, its dimensions so stupidly cyclopean that by its side, the poor giant Kafka would go completely unnoticed.

V

The Latin American returns to his own world and begins to understand many things. He discovers that although Don Quixote by rights belongs to him, he has learned words in the "Speech to the Shepherds" that go back through the ages to *Works and Days*. He opens up Bernal Díaz del Castillo's great chronicle and finds himself before the only honest-to-goodness book of chivalry that has ever been written—a book of chivalry where the evil doers are lords [*teules*] one could see and touch, where unknown animals are real, unknown cities are discovered, dragons are seen in rivers and strange mountains in snow and smoke. Without realizing it, Bernal Díaz bested the brave deeds of Amadís of Gaul, Belianis of Greece, and Florismarte of Hircania. He had discovered a world of monarchs crowned with the plumes of green birds, vegetation dating back to the origins of the earth, food never before tasted, drink extracted from cacti and palm trees, but he did not realize that in such a world, events tend to develop their own style, their own unique trajectories. Latin Americans drag a legacy of thirty centuries behind them, but in spite of a record of absurd deeds and many sins, we must recognize that *our style* is reaffirmed throughout *our history*, even though at times this style can beget veritable monsters. But there are compensations. Melgarejo, the tyrant from Bolivia, can make his horse Holofernes drink buckets of beer. During that same epoch in the Caribbean Mediterranean, José Martí appears and is capable of writing one of the best essays about the French impressionists that has ever appeared in any language. Central America, with its illiterate populations, produces a poet—Ruben Darío—who transforms all poetry written in Spanish. There is a man there who, a century and a half ago, explained the philosophical postulates of alienation to slaves emancipated only three weeks earlier. There is a man there (we cannot forget Simón Rodríguez)

who created systems of education inspired by *Emile*, where it was thought that all students had to do was learn to read in order to ascend socially by virtue of their understanding of books—which is to say, their understanding of codes. There is a man whose aim was to develop Napoleonic strategies of war using lancers riding broken down mounts without saddles or stirrups. There is the Promethean loneliness of Bolívar at Santa Marta, the nine-hour battles waged with bladed weapons in the lunar landscape of the Andes, the towers of Tikal, the frescoes rescued from the Bonampak jungle, the lasting enigma of Tihuanaco, the majesty of the acropolis at Monte Albán, the abstract—absolutely abstract—beauty of the temple at Mitla, with its variations on visual themes so totally alien to the figurative impulse. The list could go on forever.

I will say that my first inkling of the marvelous real [*lo real maravilloso*] came to me when, near the end of 1943, I was lucky enough to visit Henri Christophe's kingdom—such poetic ruins, Sans-Souci and the bulk of the Citadel of La Ferrière, imposingly intact in spite of lightning and earthquakes; and I saw the still-Norman Cape Town, the Cap Français of the former colony, where a house with great long balconies leads to the palace of hewn stone inhabited years ago by Pauline Bonaparte. My encounter with Pauline Bonaparte there, so far from Corsica, was a revelation to me. I saw the possibility of establishing certain synchronisms, American, recurrent, timeless, relating this to that, yesterday to today. I saw the possibility of bringing to our own latitudes certain European truths, reversing those who travel against the sun and would take our truths to a place where, just thirty years ago, there was no capacity to understand or measure those truths in their real dimensions. (Pauline Bonaparte—like the Venus of Canova—was, for me, a *lazarillo* and a guide as I felt my way, groping at first toward essays exploring characters like Billaud-Varenne, Collot d'Herbois, and Victor Hugues who, seen in an American light, would later animate my *Siglo de las luces* [translated as *Explosion in a Cathedral*].) After having felt the undeniable spell<sup>1</sup> of the lands of Haiti, after having found magical warnings along the red roads of the Central Meseta, after having heard the drums of the Petro and the Rada, I was moved to set this recently experienced marvelous reality beside the tiresome pretension of creating the marvelous that has characterized certain European literatures over the past thirty years. The marvelous, sought in the old clichés of the Brocelianda jungle, the Knights of the Round Table, Merlin the sorcerer and the Arthurian legend. The marvelous, in-

adequately evoked by the roles and deformities of festival characters—won't young French poets ever get tired of the *fête foraine* with its wonders and clowns, which Rimbaud dismissed long ago in his *Alchemie du verbe*? The marvelous, manufactured by tricks of prestidigitation, by juxtaposing objects unlikely ever to be found together: that old deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting table that led to ermine spoons, the snail in a rainy taxi, the lion's head on the pelvis of a widow, the Surrealist exhibitions. Or even now, the literary marvelous: the king in Sade's *Julieta*, Jarry's supermacho, Lewis' monk, the horrifying machinery of the English Gothic novel: ghosts, immured priests, lycanthropes, hands nailed to a castle door.

The result of willing the marvelous or any other trance is that the dream technicians become bureaucrats. By invoking traditional formulas, certain paintings are made into a monotonous junkyard of sugar-coated watches, seamstresses' mannequins, or vague phallic monuments: the marvelous is stuck in umbrellas or lobsters or sewing machines or whatever on a dissecting table, in a sad room, on a rocky desert. Poverty of the imagination, Unamuno said, is learning codes by heart. Today there are codes for the fantastic based on the principle of the donkey devoured by the fig, proposed as the supreme inversion of reality in *Les Chants de Maldoror*, codes to which we owe "children threatened by nightingales," or André Masson's "horses devouring birds." But observe that when André Masson tried to draw the jungle of Martinique, with its incredible intertwining of plants and its obscene promiscuity of certain fruit, the marvelous truth of the matter devoured the painter, leaving him just short of impotent when faced with blank paper. It had to be an American painter—the Cuban, Wilfredo Lam—who taught us the magic of tropical vegetation, the unbridled creativity of our natural forms with all their metamorphoses and symbioses on monumental canvases in an expressive mode that is unique in contemporary art. Faced with the unsettling imaginative poverty of a Tanguy, for example, who has spent twenty-five years painting the same stony larvae beneath the same gray sky, I feel moved to repeat a phrase that made the first batch of Surrealists proud: *Vous qui ne voyez pas, pensez à ceux qui voient* [You who can't see, think of those who can]. There are still too many "adolescents who find pleasure in raping the fresh cadavers of beautiful, dead women" (Lautréamont), who do not take into account that it would be more marvelous to rape them alive. The problem here is that many of them disguise themselves cheaply as magicians, forgetting that the mar-

velous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state [*estado límite*]. To begin with, the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith. Those who do not believe in saints cannot cure themselves with the miracles of saints, nor can those who are not Don Quixotes enter, body, soul, and possessions, into the world of Amadís of Gaul or Tirant le Blanc. Certain phrases of Rutilio about men transformed into wolves from *The Labors of Persiles and Segismunda* turn out to be prodigiously trustworthy because in Cervantes' time, it was believed that people could suffer from lupine mania. Another example is the trip a character makes from Tuscany to Norway on a witch's blanket. Marco Polo allowed that certain birds flew while carrying elephants in their claws. Even Luther saw a demon face to face and threw an inkwell at its head. Victor Hugo, exploited by sellers of marvelous books, believed in apparitions because he was sure that he had spoken with Leopoldina's ghost in Guernsey. For Van Gogh, his faith in the sunflower was enough to fix his revelation upon the canvas. Therefore, it seems that the marvelous invoked in disbelief—the case of the Surrealists for so many years—was never anything more than a literary ruse, just as boring in the end as the literature that is oneiric “by arrangement” or those praises of folly that are now back in style. (This does not mean that I agree with those who support a return to realism—a term that now implies a slavishly political agenda.) All they do is to substitute the tricks of the magician for the worn-out phrases of academics or the eschatological glee of certain existentialists. But clearly there is no excuse for poets and artists who preach sadism without practicing it, who admire the supermacho because of their own impotence, invoke ghosts without believing that they answer to incantations, who establish secret societies, literary sects, vaguely philosophical groups with saints and signs and arcane ends that are never reached, without being able to conceive of a valid mysticism or to abandon the most banal habits in order to bet their souls on the terrifying card of faith.

This seemed particularly obvious to me during my stay in Haiti, where I found myself in daily contact with something that could be defined as the marvelous real. I was in a land where thousands of men, anxious for freedom, believed in Mackandal's lycanthropic powers to the extent that

their collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution. I had already heard the prodigious story of Bouckman, the Jamaican initiate. I had been in the Citadel of La Ferrière, a work without architectural precedent, its only forerunner Piranesi's “Imaginary Prisons.” I breathed in the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of incredible zeal, much more surprising than all of the cruel kings invented by the Surrealists, who were very much affected by imaginary tyrannies without ever having suffered a one. I found the marvelous real at every turn. Furthermore, I thought, the presence and vitality of this marvelous real was not the unique privilege of Haiti but the heritage of all of America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies. The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent and who left the names that we still carry: from those who searched for the fountain of eternal youth and the golden city of Manoa to certain early rebels or modern heroes of mythological fame from our wars of independence, such as Colonel Juana de Azurduy. It has always seemed significant to me that even in 1780, sane Spaniards from Angostura would throw themselves into the search for El Dorado and that, in the days of the French Revolution—long live Reason and the Supreme Being!—the Compostellan Francisco Menéndez would walk through the land of Patagonia searching for the enchanted city of the Caesars. Focusing on another aspect of this theme, we can see that whereas in Western Europe folk dancing, for example, has lost all of its magical evocative power, it is hard to find a collective dance in America that does not embody a deep ritual sense and thus create around it a whole process of initiation: such are the dances of Cuban *santería* or the prodigious African version of the Corpus festival, which can still be seen in a town called San Francisco de Yare in Venezuela.

In the sixth song of Maldoror, there is a moment when the hero, pursued by all the police in the world, escapes an “army of agents and spies” by adopting the shapes of diverse animals and making use of his ability to transport himself instantaneously to Peking, Madrid, or Saint Petersburg. This is “marvelous literature” in full force. Yet in America, where nothing like this has been written, Mackandal lived and was endowed with the same powers by the faith of his contemporaries, who with his magic fomented one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in history. Maldoror—Ducasse himself admits it—is nothing more than a “poetic Rocambole.” Maldoror left behind only an ephemeral literary school. The

American Mackandal, on the contrary, leaves an entire mythology, preserved by an entire people and accompanied by magic hymns still sung today during voodoo ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> (It is also a strange coincidence that Isidore Ducasse, a man who had an exceptional instinct for the poetic fantastical, happened to be born in America and that he should boast so emphatically at the end of one of his poems of being *le montevidéen*.) Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [*mestizaje*], America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?

Translated by Tanya Huntington  
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#### Notes

Alejo Carpentier, "De lo real maravilloso americano," in *Tientos y diferencias* (Montevideo: Arca, 1967), pp. 96–112. The final part of this essay was published as the prologue to *The Kingdom of this World* in 1949; the parameters of the earlier text are noted in Carpentier's first footnote.

<sup>1</sup> I turn here to the text of the prologue for the first edition of my novel *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), which did not appear in later editions, even though I still consider it to be, except for certain details, as pertinent now as it was then. Surrealism no longer constitutes for us a process of erroneously directed imitation, as it did so acutely even fifteen years ago. However, we are left with a very different sort of *marvelous real*, which is growing more palpable and discernible and is beginning to proliferate in the fiction of some young novelists on our continent.

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Roumain, *Le Sacrifice du Tambour Assoto*.

#### ALEJO CARPENTIER

##### *The Baroque and the Marvelous Real*

You all know the title of the talk I've proposed to give today on two elements that, in my opinion, enter decisively into the nature and meaning of Latin American art, of this Latin America, America *mestiza*,<sup>1</sup> as José Martí called it, which Madame Vice President of this athenaeum has just evoked with her words of introduction: "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real." It is a theme rich in vicissitudes and one about which I don't want to try your patience, so I will begin without preamble, in a somewhat dry and perfunctory manner, with a few dictionary definitions.

Before I begin to talk about the baroque, I would like to settle a linguistic dispute: what is the baroque? Everybody talks about the baroque, everybody knows more or less what the baroque is or can feel the baroque. The same thing happens with Surrealism. Today, everybody knows what Surrealism is, everybody says after witnessing an unusual occurrence: "How surreal." But if we go back to the basic text on Surrealism, to André Breton's *First Manifesto*, written in 1924, we must face the fact that the definition given by the founder of this movement hardly corresponds to what happened later. Breton himself was incapable of defining what he was doing, although he knew very well what he was going to do. Let's turn to the dictionaries. Let's start with the *Petit Larousse*. We are told: "Baroque: neologism. Synonym of Churrigueresque. Gallic in its extravagance." But we look for *barroquismo*<sup>2</sup> and are told: "Neologism, extravagance, bad taste." In other words, the baroque betrays Gallic characteristics and is identified exclusively with the architecture of a man named Churriguera, who was not the best representative of the baroque period but rather of a kind of mannerism; this does not explain anything at all, because the baroque is something multiple, diverse, and enormous that surpasses the work of a single architect or a single baroque artist.