

CYCLONES AND VORTICES: ALEJO CARPENTIER'S *REASONS OF STATE* AS CARTESIAN DISCOURSE

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"Our friend laments the fact that Hugo, old Hugo, still enjoys enormous popularity in our countries . . . And, according to him this is through our lack of the Cartesian spirit (that's true: no carnivorous plants grow, no toucans fly, nor do you find cyclones in *The Discourse on Method*); we are too partial to unbridled eloquence, pathos, platform pomposity, resounding with romantic braggadocio."¹

These are the thoughts of the dictator/narrator of Alejo Carpentier's *Reasons of State* as, during the early pages of the novel, he submits uncomfortably in his Paris townhouse to the condescension of a Sorbonne professor. They reveal an ambivalence toward metropolitan values that recurs continually throughout his narrative. Although in parentheses the narrator ironically suggests the inappropriateness of rationalism in the tropics, he gives more credence to the professor's rationalist critique of Latin American verbal art than he is at first willing to admit. Immediately afterwards, he confesses that his "concept of what oratory should be" has been directly "wounded" (p. 20). Eventually his ambivalence becomes so pronounced that the political career that is the subject of his narrative begins, as Roberto González Echevarría has noted, to resemble those of certain notorious Latin American dictators who, "drunk with power and their own liberal rhetoric, became trapped in the ludicrous image of their own making."² Thus viewed as a form of rhetorical self-entrapment, the narrator's ambivalence may also be said to embody the fundamental contradictions of neo-colonialism in the Americas. For often only a grand but empty oratory served to link the magical realism of the masses with the positivist progressivism of their francophile rulers (the most famous

of whom, Mexico's Porfirio Díaz, the narrator regards as his "double").³

In the final analysis, however, both personal and historical contradictions are reconciled in *Reasons of State*. The reconciliation is achieved in the form of a reconstruction of Cartesian discourse that is both baroque and fantastic in its implications. A few preliminary remarks on the nature of this reconstruction follow.

At the outset, the narrator's divided world-view appears to be foundering on the very Cartesian dualism toward which he reacts so equivocally. He is enthralled by the concept of the sufficiency of reason alone at the same time that he is torn by a belief in the magical significance of objective reality, which Cartesianism would apparently deem irrelevant. But the Cartesian dualism is in fact a dynamism, a vacillation between atomistic and monistic extremes such as those which underlie both the personal and political contradictions of *Reasons of State*.⁴ As the narrator dryly suggests in the previously excerpted passage, Descartes was clearly no proto-romantic. But neither was he an absolute rationalist.⁵ He himself insisted, in words that serve as the epigraph to *Reasons of State*'s first chapter, that *The Discourse on Method* was not prescriptively designed "to teach the method that everyone must follow in order to use his reason properly, but only to show the way in which I have tried to use my own" (p. 9). And in Carpentier's novel — aptly entitled *El recurso del método* in the original — there are traces of a similarly self-conscious dynamic. Along with the narrator's growing ambivalence toward the products of metropolitan culture, he also demonstrates an increasingly complex appreciation of the processes of his indigenous American culture, an appreciation of them as unique continuities of old world and new.

A fuller understanding of the operations of this neo-Cartesian dynamic in *Reasons of State* can be gained by viewing it against the background of baroque art. For in applying the principle of doubt to even the operations of the discoursing self, Descartes was clearly responding to the aesthetic of his baroque age. Commentators on this allegedly seventeenth-century phenomenon (few — among them, however, Carpentier⁶ — consider it recurrent) repeatedly stress its self-reflexive nature.⁷ Indeed, what Maurice Croll has said of baroque prose in general may with even more force be said of Cartesian discourse: that "the order of its conception in the mind

is a necessary part of its truth."⁸ Moreover, the infinite richness of human perception in baroque art acts as a trope for the divine mind, which constantly renews for us the field of our vision; appropriately enough, it is transubstantiation that is said to typify this process.⁹ Accordingly, despite their obvious dearth of what in literary terms we would identify as figurative devices or tropes, *The Discourse* and *The Meditations* alike may be considered baroque. For in their metaphoric and anagogic conceptualization of matter, they epitomize the baroque spirit. Transubstantive process is both their form and their subject. Instead of working from universals to particulars, they proceed hypothetically, substituting abstraction and synthesis for exhaustive analysis and proof, in a manner that has been likened to the hypothetico-deductive method of modern science.¹⁰ Each therefore is also an indirect attack upon the *a priori*, substantialist habit of mind of scholasticism. In Descartes, as in most baroque art, subject and object have not yet become estranged; they have, in a world only recently made self-aware, just met.

In *Reasons of State*, however, subject and object are not only estranged; they no longer speak the same language. The many futile attempts of Carpentier's narrator to wed the two concepts reflect this disjunction, as they issue for the most part in ironic reminders of the impossibility of any literal application of European ideas to conditions in the Americas: "I *feel* therefore I am," for instance (p. 280). And although the narrator ultimately becomes sufficiently estranged from his petrified colonial heritage to penetrate to his nation's baroque soul and effect there a recombination of subject and object, he continues to hesitate between rationalistic and marvellous explanations of the vagaries of life in the tropics. Furthermore, his doing so seems a function of the peculiar form taken by the reconstruction of Cartesian discourse in *Reasons of State*. The literary genre known as the fantastic provides an explanation for the paradoxical nature of this process. In Todorov's recent study of this genre, it is precisely the ambiguous sort of narrative perception displayed by *Reasons of State's* narrator that characterizes the subjective principle of the fantastic. This principle, he maintains, is a certain "fragility of the limit between mind and matter," which engenders such "themes of self" as pan-determinism, multiplication of personality, obliteration of the limit between subject

and object, and the transformation of time and space.¹¹ These themes are considered by Todorov to be schizophrenic inversions of a more normal, oblique perception and are therefore alternatively entitled "themes of vision." It is by a reverse sort of symbolic inversion of Latin American discourse that *Reasons of State's* narrator ultimately divests himself of the qualities of the fantastic and achieves the peculiarly baroque reconstruction of Cartesianism that is the subject of this essay.

I wish therefore to suggest that in *Reasons of State* two radically different world views collide in the narrator's mind. I shall refer to these as "cyclonic" and "vortical." The former, a transformation of the monistic, objective pole of Cartesianism, is numinous and de-individuating and tends figuratively to spiral heavenwards. The latter, a transformation of the atomistic, subjective pole of Cartesianism, is phenomenal and individuating and tends figuratively to spiral downward into a solipsistic hell. The model for the cyclonic world-view is Catholicism or, more precisely, its magical Latin American transformation, embodied in the region's many chiliastic folk movements and figures. The model for the vortical world-view is Cartesianism or, more precisely, its progressivist Latin American transformation, embodied in the positivist trend of the *fin de siècle*. The collision of these two world-views in *Reasons of State* results in a symbolic inversion that gradually effects a baroque re-combination of subject and object in the form of a new kind of historical discourse. Furthermore, by managing to suspend its narrator and ultimately its reader between such apparently discredited explanations of the human condition as magical realism and positivist progressivism, while at the same time suggesting their common spiritual ancestry, *Reasons of State* must also be considered a species of the neo-fantastic. My demonstration of this dual thesis will take the form of an examination of *Reasons of State's* subjective, or epistemological, principle, which, as I have already suggested, owes a great deal of its power in this novel to Carpentier's employment of a dialectic whose opposite poles are the fantastic and the baroque.

Pan-determinism, that state of mind in which even the most "chance" occurrence has its cause, is the first of the "themes of self" engendered by the subjective principle of the fantastic. It is manifest on two levels in *Reasons of State*: the level of folk-cons-

ciousness and the level of the narrator's own consciousness. Diametrically opposed at first, these two levels eventually merge and become indistinguishable. Early in the novel, while enjoying sybaritic absentee rule in Paris, the narrator is inclined to deride the superstitious practices of his peasantry. He scoffs at the "object of worship" that his wife had become even before her death, at her portrait, which women "used to say . . . cured the colic and the pains of childbirth," and at the canonization called for by the archbishop at her funeral a few years before the beginning of the narrative (p. 17). Yet upon learning of the first revolution in his homeland in thirty years, he mentally transports himself back "over there" in mindless adolescent terror by blaming the coup upon an evening of whorehouse sacrilege: "that affair with the little nun of Saint Vincent de Paul," he says of his adventure with a prostitute skilled in iconoclastic ecstasies, "had brought . . . bad luck" (p. 31). Upon his *physical* return to his country, he betrays the even greater depth of his superstition, an almost primordial manicheanism: "I see, with the eyes of smell, the outline of leaves growing inside chapels of shadow; I depict for myself the architecture of a tree by the plaintive creaking of a bough . . . and [re-gain] an aggressiveness possibly due to the surrounding vegetation and its uninterrupted battle to reconquer the open space of the rail-way line along which our locomotive was winding . . . I must be hard, implacable; this was demanded by the implacable, pitiless powers that still made up the dark and all-powerful reason of existence — the visceral peristalsis — of the world in gestation" (pp. 40-41).

At its most profound, the narrator's pan-deterministic habit of mind takes on the quality of the absurd, as distinctions between good and evil blur altogether and the universe becomes increasingly inscrutable. A good example of such absurdity occurs during the cave scene at the end of chapter three. The narrator and his closest advisors have been forced to take cover by a thunderstorm/flood that has interrupted their "implacable" pursuit of the rebel Galván and his supporters. Ensnared with a bottle of brandy and a repertoire of war stories, they idly toss a few stones into the rear of the cave, and a slight crash is heard. More stones, more crashes, and the men, investigating, find the shattered remains of six ancient funeral jars and six mummies "squatting with crossed

arms" and "making up a terrible enclave of violation" (pp. 57-58). "The Devil! The Devil! Keep away!" all three yell as they flee from the cave, but the narrator's participation in these cries is not merely another example of manicheanism. For the manichean identification of nature with pitiless, dark forces was at least neutralized, however tenuously, by the civilizing force of the steam engine. Here, such self-assurance is literally and figuratively shattered. It is precisely the forces of "progress" that have released the forces of evil. The rupture of the mummies' jars during the search for the rebels (instituted in the defense of a regime committed to the "scientific" management of government) unleashes an alternative world-view of mystery and evil, and a paradoxical contamination takes place between the two forces. As a consequence, the earlier distinction between good and evil can no longer be maintained.

Years later, after a forced abdication has increased the narrator's conviction that malign powers are at large in the world, he summons the courage for one final confrontation with ancestral spirits, one of which now resides in state in a Paris museum, deflecting attention from its donor's less laudable accomplishments. The narrator, sounding strangely like both Ahab and Prometheus, suddenly lashes out at his mummified nemesis. "Don't complain, you bastard, because I took you out of your mud and turned you into a person . . . into a per . . ." (p. 303). "Uneasiness, vertigo, collapse" ensue, and within weeks he is dead, the victim of a divided vision that is perversely baroque. Able to sense the marvellous in even the grimmest necessity, he is nonetheless prevented by the direct vision of a pragmatic rationalism from making the liberating self-examination that Descartes had called for: one that comprehends man first and foremost as symbol-maker. As a consequence of such "single vision," the narrator fails to see his muddled mirror image staring back at him across the millennia; hence his descent into the maelstrom of self and finally (but not before his disparate worlds merge in a liberating baroque vision) into death.

Divided vision also characterizes another of the subjective themes of the fantastic found in *Reasons of State* — multiplication of personality. A favorite theme of Carpentier's fiction, it is also central to *The Kingdom of This World*, an earlier novel set in Haiti during its slave-insurrection period and rife with voodoo-induced metamorphosis.¹² In *Reasons of State* a similar folk

phenomenon occurs after the failure of yet another military coup, with the rise of the Marxist journalist-hero known as "the Student." Taking advantage of anonymity and long-smoldering popular resentment against the narrator's dictatorship, "the Student" has accepted credit for bombings and minor uprisings throughout the country. A myth of protean ubiquity very quickly develops around his name. In this regard he may be said to embody the chiasm of his countrymen, to incarnate their millennialism, that is, and put it to political use. What conventional Christianity would de-individuate into an amorphous "mystical body of Christ," and what even folk religion would atomize in the form of pentecostal catharsis, "the Student" would instead transform into a collective force of individuals who have been encouraged by his example to make personal commitments to a socialist form of government. But, as the narrator is cynically assured by his secretary in the same relativizing tone of voice often used by his employer, there have already been several unsuccessful folk-generated "myths of the Resurrection-of-the-Ancient-Gods," which produced only "a Fantastic City in the jungles of Yucatan, when Paris was celebrating the advent of the Century of Science and worshipping the Good Fairy Electricity" (pp. 206-07).

To the reader seeking a traditional narrative perspective, the multiple personalities assumed by the narrator in *Reasons of State* are bound to be far more problematic than those assumed by the folk mind. Alternatively interpersonal and schizophrenic, he manages to convey the flavor of both atomistic and monistic discourse, of both solipsist horror and chiliast delusion, and even, at times, to suggest their reconciliation. Accordingly, narration takes three overlapping forms: the confiding first-person voice of the dictator, a mysterious third-person voice that comments upon the dictator's "official" behavior, and a more detached, self-consciously omniscient, and ludic third-person voice. Until the narrator receives the telegram informing him of Galván's attempted coup, he speaks informally in his first-person voice, creating the impression of a jaded but self-satisfied patriarch-in-absentia. With the telegram, however, he steps back and watches his militant, "implacable" self take over: "'The cunt! The son of a bitch!'" yelled the Head of State hurling the cables to the ground... as if his vocabulary was limited to these sordid phrases when thinking of

the treachery of the man whom he had dragged from the squalor of a provincial barracks" (p. 28). Thereafter, whenever the narrator is forced by civil war to reassume his role as "Head of State," this schizoid narrative pattern repeats itself. It even surfaces during a carnival stopover in Havana, while the narrator is en route to do battle with Galván. As his cab enters the redolent rundown neighborhood of the mulatto girl with whom he will spend the night, he again steps out of role, but this time it is to regard his "official" self with more sympathy and a sense of the past. Through the cab windows there stream familiar childhood smells, "the effluvium of brown sugar, hot furnaces and green coffee, within a widespread reek of stables, saddlers and mildewed old walls still cool with night dew, saltpetre, and mosses. 'Watch while I sleep, my friend,' said the Head of State to me. 'Don't worry, my friend, I've got the needful here,' I said, taking the Browning out of my breast pocket. And while the Head of State and the mulatto disappeared for I don't know how long behind a blue door, I installed myself on a cowhide stool, with my weapon across my thighs" (pp. 38-39).

That this remarkably schizophrenic scene is at the same time so playfully tender suggests that we have been misinterpreting the narrative voice thus far if we are still hearing it as a simple dualism. But by this point in the novel the reader should have detected, in the inconsistent tenses of the verbs in certain portions of the narrative, the voice of a trickster retrospectively lurking beneath the convention of plot linearity. During the novel's early pages, the story is told as if it were occurring in the immediate present, seemingly taking its cue from the narrator's confused struggle to get his bearings upon awakening. But very shortly we have several indications that the entire narrative is instead proceeding in a timeless, hypnagogic state, that it is an imaginative recollection taking place in the vivid dream state between waking and sleeping. After several pages of first-person, present-tense narration involving the various impressions and services granted the narrator at the beginning of his day, we notice that his reflections abruptly become retrospective: "And now I *am* facing the window, and the tailor is telling me about some of his clients whose names add to his professional prestige.... Thus he *informed* me that Gabriel D'Annunzio...ordered twelve fancy waistcoats and other garments to the details of which I hardly *listened*" (p. 15, emphasis added).

He hardly listened because the mention of the great poet and orgiast had induced in him a fantastic reverie of D'Annunzio's palatial villa and its rumored courtesans. And as a marker of the fantastic, tense-shifting in *Reasons of State* is certainly a phenomenon worth exploring, particularly since for the narrator it is also a marker of the baroque.¹³ But it is not necessary to analyze systematically the tenses of *Reasons of State* in order to demonstrate that the narrative proceeds from the perspective of a hypnagogic present. One need only note that the narrator's dying thoughts are identical to those with which the novel began, although the possibility of confusion between sleeping and waking is a bit more clearly marked this time. In view of the coincidence of those two passages and of certain contextual similarities such as their common location — a hammock — it becomes quite clear that the novel is written in the form of an extended deathbed retrospective.

Such a retrospective narrative implies a de-emphasis of the sequential ordering of events and a correspondingly increased emphasis upon their metaphoric ordering.¹⁴ In other words, a concern for temporal sequence and causality gives way to a concern for the relatedness, the structural similarity and dissimilarity, of items within a sequence. As in traditional baroque art, there is also a resultant relativizing of time conducive to a sense of the eternal present.¹⁵ That this typically baroque perspective should be acquired in death is, in a sense, absurd: the ahistoricism of both chiliasm and progressivism is finally realized in a synchronous vision, but by a dead man. In another sense, however, by a symbolic inversion of which the hammock as womb is the chief trope, the narrator is quickening the possibility of a particularly vitalistic kind of historical discourse. History is no longer an unwitting reification of links in a diachronic chain, but rather a self-consciously synchronic sounding of any one of those links. Likewise, personality no longer holds the central position it has always held in both historical and fantastic discourse, which is, in any case, "nothing but the bad conscience of [a] positivist era."¹⁶ The era referred to is the nineteenth century, but in fact its positivism carried well into the second decade of the next century in Latin America. The narrated action that is the subject of synchronous vision in *Reasons of State* takes place during this latter time period, with a leap forward to 1972 as the end, at which time we learn that the nar-

rator's daughter has in the interim continued the reconstruction of self and of history begun by her father — by defiantly placing soil from the Luxembourg Gardens (instead of the ritually prescribed homeland) in his half-pagan, half-Christian tomb in Montparnasse.

Synchronous vision, in its fantastic as opposed to its symbolically-inverted, neo-baroque form, already represents an overlapping of the third and fourth of Todorov's "themes of self." But since I am using Todorov's categories only as an aid in understanding the ways in which Carpentier has re-injected the mind and matter dynamic of Descartes into its static descendants, I will not press too zealously any distinction between these two themes. Suffice it to say that transformation of time and space, and of the limits between subject and object, is characteristic of the retrospective reflections of Carpentier's narrator. This is so whether the narrator speaks as, or of, the dictator (as we have already seen) or whether he speaks omnisciently. It is in this latter voice, the voice of the trickster become profound, that the narrator's sense of the baroque nature of Latin American history attains its sharpest pitch. In a series of three historical visions toward the end of the novel, the narrator passes from solipsistic fantasy, through baroque mysticism, and finally to meta-historical insight in which space and time are collapsed and subject and object united on a universal scale.

The first of these visions occurs a few years before the narrator's fatal plunge into the vortex of rationalism in the Paris museum. In the abundant corporeality of the "Aux Glaces" brothel, with the permanent condition of exile already beginning to weigh heavily upon him, the narrator finds cold comfort and expresses it in the muddled tenses of fantastic reverie: "In the irreversible Time of the flesh, it was possible to pass, according to period, from the style of Bouguereau to that of medieval Eve . . . Here, looking at what I am looking at, I feel I am witnessing the Arrest of Time . . . I *feel* therefore I am" (pp. 279-80). But stasis, of course, was precisely what Descartes sought to eliminate from his theory of knowledge, although he could not foretell that in applying his *cogito*, future thinkers might retreat into solipsistic sensationalism.

To this temporary sort of ahistoricism, however, we must oppose the narrator's "marvellous re-discovery of time past" through the medium of his daughter Ofelia's consciousness. His exile still

a relatively recent imposition, the narrator is noisily enjoying a creole dinner with his mulatto mistress in one of the upstairs rooms of his townhouse, when Ofelia returns home and is appalled by their *gaucherie*. The smell of a tamale distracts her, however, and she appears to lapse into reverie. What follows is a unique blend of each of the narrator's several voices, suggesting that in retrospective reconstruction of this incident he is also reconstructing his understanding of his daughter and of his own childhood: "She bit into it, and all at once her body grew younger by thirty years And there came back to her . . . the smells from the kitchen . . . and this maize here (I'm seven years old, and already I look at myself in the mirror every morning to see if I've grown breasts in the night) entering my body at every pore. I'm seven years old: Santa Maria,/ Save us from evil/ Protect us, Señora/ From this terrible devil" (pp. 284-85). The coincidence of sexual awakening and fear of Satan (both at the significant age of seven, the "age of reason" according to Roman Catholic dogma) suggests, especially against the background of magical union with an elemental existence, that the narrator has in retrospect tapped the source of much of his own, his daughter's, and his people's guilts and fears. Mortification of the flesh, personified in the novel by the cult of the Divine Sheperdess, now appears to him on a par with the "Good Fairy Electricity" insofar as the essentially imported and anti-instinctual character of each is concerned. Such suspicion of the relativity of value systems is consequently borne out by the wholehearted popular support of the narrator's successor in his embracing of large-scale technological assistance from the United States. Yet at the time, after a momentary interpenetration, father and daughter had remained ciphers to each other, enjoying their separate misanthropies.

The narrator further advances his understanding of the dialectical nature of history with his reconsideration of an incident involving "the Student" and Notre Dame Cathedral. During a stopover in Paris on his way to a world socialist convention in Brussels, the young man had paused incongruously in the famous cathedral. The narrator and his party happened by and, without realizing who it was they were seeing, noticed the young man in rapt contemplation of the rose windows. Later, in a café to which his party had repaired for drinks, the narrator recognized him

as “the Student.” Now, in retrospect, the narrator reconstructs what he supposes to have been the object of his former opponent’s contemplation. The result is a vision which builds directly upon the narrator’s previous vision by taking religious faith as its theme. But in the way that it insists on a return to a Cartesian self-awareness unsullied by positivist cant or monist ecstasies, and in its implicit alignment with Marxist ideology, it is of much broader import. Though he sees “the Student” as “an enemy of the politics and compromise which so often, in his world, took the Church into the camp of his adversaries, and in the name of faith maintained a false order which was self-destructive,” the narrator nonetheless senses in him someone “responsive to the dynamic quality of the Gospels.” For “their texts had, at one time, had the merit of causing a resounding devaluation of all totems and inexorable spirits, dark presences and zodiacal threats.” Yet he realizes that “if some new self-awareness — putting the drama of life *within* instead of outside himself — had induced man to analyze the values which led him into primitive terrors” (here, of course, the narrator is referring to Cartesianism), he had nonetheless developed into “an erring giant, tyrannized over by others like himself, who had become faithless to their first vows, and had created new totems . . . and irreligious cults which it was necessary to destroy” (p. 294).

The sort of historical discourse called for here requires a unique double vision: the ability to perceive as “true” text only that which devalues the totemic text without elevating such devaluation to the status of totem itself. To this sort of vision the totemic creeds of “cyclonic” chiasm and “vortical” positivism are of course opposed. Nonetheless, its model in *Reasons of State* is the Cartesianism from which each of these totemic texts may be said to have sprung. A brief review of the ground covered thus far will help make this final point clear.

The subjective principle of *Reasons of State*, as we have seen, is the general fragility of the limits between matter and mind. This principle appears in the novel as various themes of “self” about which we can now be more specific. The first of these is a pan-determinism that ultimately takes the form of a manicheanism comprised equally of spiritualist dread of necessity and positivist dread of freedom. The second of these themes, multiplication of personality, takes the form on the one hand of a folk consciousness

that perennially mythologizes its heroes in order to keep them safely beyond reach and, on the other, of a schizoid individual consciousness that has difficulty distinguishing between its real and its public personae. A final thematic manifestation of the fantastic subjective principle in *Reasons of State* is its dual tendency to collapse space and time as well as the limitations between subject and object. This tendency expresses itself ideally as a desire both to understand and to partake of the historical process, but practically as an attempt to escape into either the illusory permanence of the flesh or the cold comfort of rationalistic self-sufficiency. Throughout, a baroque synesthesia (predominantly olfactory) threatens to collapse these artificially demarcated categories by temporarily sensitizing the "single" vision to which chiliasm and positivism have each reduced Cartesianism. But the discoursing self in *Reasons of State*, the embodiment of both of these contrary world-views, is so radically divided that its individual incarnation, the "Head of State," eventually achieves only that tenuous reconciliation which is afforded by irony. "*Acta est fabula*," the play has ended, are the words that he speaks with his dying breath.

The influence of the baroque in the novel, however, is not limited to its sensory appeal. Nor is the discoursing self sheer personality. The very transubstantive nature of the baroque and of Cartesianism, their self-consciously and self-effacingly processual form, prevent *Reasons of State* from being read as a simple case history of abnormal psychology, either personal or cultural. Rather, the novel must in the final analysis be read as "meta-history," in the two senses implied by this term: in the sense, that is, of history as metaphor rather than metonym, and in the sense of commentary upon and transformation of conventional histories. As metaphor, *Reasons of State* has been shown to employ its narrator's radically split consciousness as an emblem of modern Latin American political and cultural history, in particular of their odd mix of magical realism and positivist progressivism. And while both the tenor and the vehicle of this complex metaphor suggest, overall, a fantastic evasion of ordinary reality and an infatuation instead with its extremes, we have also seen signs of a healing of this rift in a burgeoning, self-aware folk consciousness, for which the image of the novel as a cocoon-like womb/tomb is an apt trope.

But as meta-history, *Reasons of State* also proposes itself as a model for historical discourse. The informing principle of this model is that all human experience and discourse is to a great extent conditioned by, and therefore “historically” recoverable as the working out of, the epistemological assumptions that underlie a culture’s complex of values. It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which the epistemological principles we have been examining are reflected in the discourse of *Reasons of State*’s various personae. Such a study would, I think, profitably assume as its starting point the relations between the sexes in the novel, in particular the male tendency to polarize its female images — most strikingly manifested in the narrator’s own quite sado-masochistic intercourse with most women. While his discourse with most men is *macho* — loud, self-aggrandizing, devoid of desire (only “the Student,” that faintly androgynous spectre, elicits from him anything but an *usted*) — his discourse with women takes place almost entirely on the level of desire, an unconscious desire, as Todorov says of the inverse objective principle of the fantastic, to return to “the spirit of religion, the mother, etc.” (p. 138). And I have no doubt that careful analysis will show that the almost manichean form assumed by *Reasons of State*’s female principle is traceable to the radical division of subject and object in the novel’s central male consciousness. But even without the actual assurance of such a study, I cannot but conclude that *Reasons of State*’s paradigm for historical discourse is a form of Cartesian process. Its priorities are epistemological. Even its most interpersonal moments are expressed dynamically: “it’s a sort of dialogue — sometimes a battle — opposition and agreement between the female hand (the right) and the male hand (the left) which combine, complement one another, respond, but in a synchronization that is situated both within and outside the rhythm” (p. 261). These remarks refer specifically to the wonderfully communicative piano-playing of the mulatto American consul who entertains the narrator and his mistress while they await deportation to the sterility, the “lucidity and transparency in argument” of France. But they refer just as much to the ballet of subject and object, of vortex and cyclone, of male and female, that in *Reasons of State* Carpentier has performed on positivist Latin America’s grave.

NOTES

¹ Alejo Carpentier, *Reasons of State*, Francis Partridge, translator (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 19. Originally published in 1974 by Siglo Veintiuno Editores, S. A., Mexico City, as *El recurso del método*. Subsequent references to the English edition will be by page number only and will appear parenthetically in my text.

² Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 261.

³ See, for instance, Michael A. Weinstein's brief discussion of the "poca política y mucha administración" motto of the Díaz regime in his *Polarity of Mexican Thought: Instrumentalism and Finalism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 32.

⁴ Francis H. Parker, *The Story of Western Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 201.

⁵ But see González Echevarría, pp. 258-66, where, beginning with Carpentier's own testimony that *Reasons of State* is "Descartes' *Discourse on Method* turned upside down," he argues that Cartesian discourse is being parodied in the novel and that it is Vico's idea of history as man-made which Carpentier holds up to us as a paradigm and by means of which "the imperialistic centrality of thought posited by Descartes" is undermined. My only reservation concerning this argument is that it does not take into account Descartes' own, essentially baroque, application of the principle of doubt to the operations of the discoursing self, which it is my purpose in this paper to elaborate on as the informing principle of *Reasons of State*.

⁶ See, in Carpentier's *Tientos y Diferencias* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1964), the two essays, "Problemática de la actual novela latinoamericana" and "La ciudad de las columnas."

⁷ See, for example, Maurice Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," in *"Attic" and Baroque Prose Style: The Anti-Ciceronian Movement*, J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans, with John M. Wallace, editors (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 207-33; Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Verse of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 2; Lowry Nelson, *Baroque Lyric Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 3-8, 22-26, 92; Wylie Sypher, "Baroque," in *Four Stages of Renaissance Style* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1955), pp. 180-250; Frank Warnke, *European Metaphysical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 2-3; and René Wellek, "The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, V (December 1946), 77-109.

⁸ Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," p. 210.

⁹ See, for instance, Sypher, p. 187, where he cites the Council of Trent's dogmatization of transubstantiation as a catalyst of the baroque: "By sanctioning the veneration of images and by its emphasis upon transubstantiation, the Council, in effect gave the pious a confidence in sensory experience and offered a means of reducing the anxiety in mannerist consciousness, relaxing the tension between body and soul." And René Wellek's summary of several centuries of commentary on the baroque confirms the transubstantiation thesis: "an indubitable connection [exists] between the emblematic image and belief in the pervasive parallelism between macro-

cosmos and microcosmos, in some vast system of correspondence which can be expressed only by sensuous symbolism" (p. 95).

¹⁰ Paul J. Olscamp, "Introduction," in René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, Paul J. Olscamp, translator and editor (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), pp. xviii-xxxiv.

¹¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Richard Howard, translator (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 107-23.

¹² Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, Harriet de Onís, translator (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957). Originally published in 1949 as *El reino de este mundo* by E. D. I. A. P. S. A. in Mexico, D. F.

¹³ Various smells, sounds and sculptures, for example, seem to account for the rumors of courtesans, and in the very next scene, also remarkable for its tense-shifting, the narrator's daughter produces in the narrator a reverie concerning his late wife's alleged miraculous powers just by playing "Für Elise" on the piano in the next room.

¹⁴ See Roman Jakobson's well-known discussion of this concept, which he calls "the poetic function," in his "Linguistics and Poetics," on p. 95 of *The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, Richard and Fernande DeGeorge, editors (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 85-122.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Lowry Nelson, *Baroque Lyric Poetry*, p. 26, where he speaks of the baroque lyric's "tendency to 'conquer' time or to make it 'relative.'"

¹⁶ I would like to express my appreciation to Professors Roberto González Echevarría and Djelal Kadir for the helpful suggestions and dialogue they provided me while I was working on this essay.