

"Prologue" to *The Kingdom of This World*

--Alejo Carpentier, 1949.

(The Prologue is a key statement about 'marvelous realism' and the place of Haiti in the Caribbean literary imagination. Carpentier wrote the Prologue - and *The Kingdom of This World* - during a resurgence of mundonovismo ['New-Worldism'] among Latin American artists and intellectuals. Mundonovismo combines indigenisme and Negritude with Jose Marti's "Our America" 10 concepts into a syncretic-hybrid creollismo/creolité/Caribbeanness ideology.)

The first part of this essay excoriates European surrealism for its empty falsity; the second refers to the marvelous reality of Haiti. Henri Christophe was a revolutionary leader who later became Emperor of Haiti, and who built Sans Souci and La Ferrière Citadel; Mackandal and Bouckman were slaves instrumental in the Haitian Revolution [they will all appear in *The Kingdom of This World*]. Mackandal led an ultimately unsuccessful uprising a few decades before the revolution proper, 20 whereas Bouckman was one of the principal actors in the uprising that led to Haiti's independence from France.)

What must be understood concerning this matter of being transformed into wolves is that there is an illness that the doctors call wolf madness.

--*Los trabajos de Persiles y Segismunda*¹

· Text taken from: <http://copland.udel.edu/~braham/carpentier-marvelous.doc>.

Footnote text taken from:

http://instruct.uwo.ca/english/160e/Prologue.html#N_25

¹ *The Toils of Persiles and Sigismunda* (1617); Cervantes last romance, the story of the religious conversion of some travellers from Greenland to Rome.

At the end of 1943 I had the good fortune to visit the kingdom of Henri Christophe - the ruins, so poetic, of Sans Souci; 30 the imposing bulk of the Citadel of La Ferrière, intact in spite of thunderbolts and earthquakes - and to discover Ciudad del Cabo [Cap Haïtien], still Norman to this day - the Cap Français of the former colony - where a street of very long balconies leads to the stone palace once occupied by Pauline Bonaparte. Having felt the indisputable charm of the Haitian landscape, having found magical portents in the red roads of the Central Plateau, and heard the drums of the Voodoo gods Petro and Rada, I was moved to compare the marvelous reality I had recently experienced with that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has 40 characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years. The marvelous, pursued in old prints of the forest Brocelianda,² of the knights of the Round Table, the wizard Merlin and the Arthurian cycle. The marvelous, pathetically evoked in the skills and deformities of fairground characters - will the young French poets never tire of the freaks and clowns of the circus, to which Rimbaud had already bade farewell in his *Alchimie du verbe*?³ The marvelous, produced by means of conjuring tricks, bringing together objects which would never normally meet: the old and fraudulent story of the chance encounter of the umbrella and the 50 sewing machine on an operating table,⁴ which spawned the ermine

² The forest of Broceliande lies in the region known today as Paimpont, to the south west of Rennes.. This enchanted region is the setting for the quest by the Knights of the Round Table to recover the Holy Grail under orders from King Arthur. One of the best known inhabitants of the forest was Merlin the Magician.

³ The second Delirium, "The Alchemy of the Word," is from *A Season in Hell* (1873) the best known prose poem by the great French Symbolist, Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1881). The poem recounts his sufferings close to madness and his failed experiment to become a seer poet.

⁴ Carpentier alludes to, and may be misreading Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870), who wrote under the name Comte de Lautréamont. The image of the umbrella appears in the sixth canto of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1890) and was for Breton and the Surrealists the emblem of a fortuitous and

spoons,⁵ snails in a rainy taxi, and the lion's head in a widow's pelvis of the surrealist exhibitions. Or even the marvelous in

incongruous encounter. Lautréamont describes an encounter with a passerby as follows:

I am an expert at judging age from the physiognomic lines of the brow: he is sixteen years and four months of age. He is as handsome as the retractility of the claws in birds of prey; or, again, as the unpredictability of muscular movement in sores in the soft part of the posterior cervical region; or, rather, as the perpetual motion rat-trap which is always reset by the trapped animal and which can go on catching rodents indefinitely and works even when it is hidden under straw; and, above all, as the chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table!

(*Maldoror and Poems*. Trans. Paul Knight, Penguin Books, 1978)

The Surrealists regarded Duchamp as an antecedent, and this particular image and variations of it seem to have been especially resonant with them. See, for example, Salvador Dalí's poem, "You Could See the Ass's Bone," in Julien Levy's *Surrealism* (New York, 1936) or Joseph Cornell's *Collage* (1932) below. According to Nancy Gray Diaz, Carpenter is reading Lautréamont through a Surrealist filter; in actuality, the *Chants of Maldoror* constitute "a vigorous, multivalent assault on the French popular novel, Romantic literature and beyond these, the western literary tradition, for the transgressions of its myth-making"(52). See "The Metamorphosis of Maldoror and Mackandal: Reconsidering Carpenter's Reading of Lautréamont," *Modern Language Studies* 21, no 3 (Summer 1991): p. 48-56.]

⁵ Carpenter here alludes to a number of works that he might have seen at the 1938 "Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme" in Paris (Galerie Beaux-Arts). Meret Oppenheim created her *Object: Fur Covered Cup, Saucer, and Spoon* in 1936. Salvador Dalí's *Rainy Taxi* was the main object in the lobby of the January, 1938 "Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme". The installation consisted of the hulk of a taxi containing a driver with a shark's head (supposedly Christopher Columbus) and a blonde female passenger. Holes had been cut in the roof of the taxi to let rain seep through the installation for the benefit of the 200 live snails.

literature: the king of de Sade's *Juliette*, Jarry's supermale, Lewis's monk,⁶ the blood-curdling theatrical props of the English Gothic novel: ghosts, walled-up priests, werewolves, hands nailed to the doors of castles.

But, determined to invoke the marvelous at any cost, the miracle workers turn into bureaucrats. Calling on timeworn formulae which reduce certain paintings to a predictable jumble of drooping timepieces, dressmakers' dummies, and vague phallic monuments, the marvelous is consigned to the umbrella or lobster or sewing machine, or whatever it may be, on an operating table, in the interior of a desolate room, in a desert of rocks. Imaginative poverty, Unamuno said,⁷ consists in learning codes by heart. And today there exist codes of the fantastic - based on the principle of the donkey devoured by a fig, proposed by the *Chants de Maldoror* as the supreme inversion of reality - to which we owe many "children threatened by nightingales," of André Masson's "horses devouring birds."⁸ But note that when André Masson wanted to draw the jungle of the island of Martinique, with its incredible tangle of plants and the obscene promiscuity of certain of its fruits,

The "head of a lion on the pelvis of a widow" refers to Georges Hugnet's *Woman Panther* (1938).

⁶ Carpenter aludes to Donatien Alphonse François, comte de Sade (1740-1814). His *Histoire de Juliette; ou, Les Prosperites du vice* (6 vols.) appeared in 1797. Alfred Jarry (1873-1907); his *Ubi Roi* appeared in 1896. Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818); his *The Monk* was published in 1796.

⁷ Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), important member of the Spanish Generation of 1898; a philosopher in the Existentialist vein.

⁸ *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale* (1924), by Max Ernst; *Horses Devouring Birds* (1927) by Andre Masson, oil and feathers on canvas. The image of the fig devouring the donkey occurs early in the fourth canto of the *Chants*, and is intended to convey Maldoror's condemnation of figurative language. The "drooping clocks," "seamstress' dummies," "phallic monuments," etc. referred to earlier in the paragraph indicate works by [Dali](#) and [Giorgio de Chirico](#).

the prodigious truth of the subject devoured the painter, leaving him all but impotent before the blank paper. And it was left to a painter from America, the Cuban Wilfredo Lam,⁹ to show us the magic of tropical vegetation, the unbridled Creation of Forms of our nature - with all its metamorphoses and symbioses - in monumental canvases of an expressiveness unique in contemporary painting.* Confronted by the disconcerting imaginative poverty of a Tanguy,¹⁰ for example, who for twenty-five years has painted the same petrified larvae beneath the same grey sky, I am moved to repeat a dictum which filled the first crop of surrealists with pride: "You who do not see, think of those who do." There are still too many "adolescents who find pleasure in violating the corpses of beautiful women recently died" (Lautréamont), without realizing that the truly remarkable thing would be to violate the living.¹¹ But what many forget, in disguising themselves as cheap magicians, is that the marvelous

⁹ [Andre Masson](#) (1896-1987) left France in March 1941, and spent three weeks in Martinique in the company of [Wilfredo Lam](#) (1902-1982) and Claude Levi-Strauss. Lam had come to Martinique with Breton and numerous other artists and intellectuals, all heading for the USA directly or indirectly. Early in 1942, and in subsequent years, Lam attended Afro-Cuban ritual dances and naïgô ceremonies in Havana and elsewhere with Carpentier and others. In 1945, Lam, Breton, and Pierre Mabille visited Haiti, where they witnessed voudon ceremonies.

¹⁰ [Ives Tanguy](#) (1900-1955)

¹¹ "In his critique of Ducasse, Carpentier demonstrates ironically how much of a Surrealist he is. Furthermore, the remark about the delights of raping live women places him with the Surrealists in the cult of gratuitous violence advocated by Breton, Artaud, and other French writers of the thirties (including Gaston Bachelard, who wrote his study of Lautréamont, a celebration of violence, in the thirties. Violence in *El reino* itself, of course, is in no way gratuitous, since it serves the goal of revolution against oppression. But here again Carpentier approximates Ducasse, in whose work violence is anything but gratuitous, as it works to try to demolish what Ducasse considers to be the pernicious influence of literary myth, metamorphosis arming itself to destroy metaphor" (55). Nancy Gray Diaz; see note 8.

becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favourable illumination of the previously unremarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with peculiar intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of "limit state." First of all, the sense of the marvelous presupposes a faith.¹² Those who do not believe in saints will not be cured by the miracles of saints, nor will those who are not Don Quixotes be able to enter body and soul into the world of *Amidis de Gaul* or *Tirant lo Blanc*.¹³ Certain statements made by Rutilio in *Los trabajos de Persiles y Segismunda* about men being transformed into wolves are entirely trustworthy, because in Cervantes' time it was believed that people would be afflicted with wolf madness. Likewise the journey of the character from Tuscany to Norway on a witch's cloak. Marco Polo accepted that certain birds could fly carrying elephants in their claws, and Luther came face to face with the devil and threw an inkwell at his head. Victor Hugo, so exploited by the book-keepers of the fantastic, believed in spirits, because he was convinced that he had spoken, in Guernsey, to the ghost of Leopoldine. It was sufficient for Van

¹² Cf.; William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (1929)] " I learned from Louis that we white strangers in this 20th century city (New York), with our electric lights and motor cars, bridge games and cocktail parties, were surrounded by another world invisible, a world of marvels, miracles, and wonders--a world in which the dead rose from their graves and walked, in which a man lay dying within shouting distance of my own house and from no mortal illness but because an old woman out in Léogâne sat slowly unwinding the thread wrapped round a wooden doll made in his image, a world in which trees and beasts talked for those whose ears were attuned, in which gods spoke from burning bushes, as on Sinai, and sometimes still walked bodily as in Eden's garden...Voodoo in Haiti is a profound and vitally alive religion--alive as Christianity was in its beginnings and in the early Middle Ages when miracles and mystical illuminations were common everyday occurrences" (12).

¹³ Romances of chivalry read by Don Quixote.

Gogh to believe in the Sunflower¹⁴ to fix his revelation on canvas.

110 Thus the marvelous born of disbelief - as in the long years of surrealism - was never more than a literary ruse, as tedious, after a time, as a certain brand of "ordered" oneiric literature, certain eulogies of madness, with which we are all too familiar. But this is not, of course, to concede the argument to those who advocate a *return to the real* - a term which acquires, then, a gregariously political meaning - who do nothing more than substitute for the magician's tricks the commonplaces of the committed man of letters or the eschatological humour of certain existentialists. But it is undoubtedly true that there is scant defence for poets and artists

120 who praise sadism without practising it, who admire a miraculous virility on account of their own impotence, who invoke spirits without believing in spells, and who found secret societies, literary sects, vaguely philosophical groups, with saints and signs and arcane objectives - never attained - without being able to conceive of a valid mysticism or abandon their petty habits in order to gamble their souls on the fearful card of faith.

This became particularly clear to me during my stay in Haiti, where I found myself in daily contact with something which might be called the marvelous in the real. I was treading on land where

130 thousands of men anxious for freedom had believed in the lycanthropic powers of Mackandal, to the point where this collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution. I already knew the extraordinary tale of Bouckman, the Jamaican initiate. I had been in the Citadel of La Ferrière, a work without architectural antecedents, foreshadowed only in the *Imaginary Prisons* of Piranesi.¹⁵ I had breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of incredible exploits, far more

astonishing than all the cruel kings invented by the surrealists, so fond of tyrannies of the imaginary variety, although they never had to endure them in reality. At every step I encountered the marvelous in the real. But I also thought that the presence and prevalence of this marvelous reality was not a privilege unique to Haiti, but the patrimony of the whole of America, where there has yet to be drawn up, for example, a complete list of cosmogonies. The fantastic is to be found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates on the history of the Continent and who left names still borne to this day: from those who left names still borne to this day: from those who sought the Fountain of Eternal Youth, from the golden city of Manoa, to the first rebels or the modern heroes of our wars of independence of such mythological stamp as the colonel's wife, Juana de Azurduy.¹⁶ It has always seemed significant to me that, in 1780, some Spanish wiseman, setting sail from Angostura, should still embark on a quest for El Dorado, and that, at the time of the French Revolution - long live Reason and the Supreme Being! - Francesco Menendez from Compostela should wander through the lands of Patagonia in search of the Enchanted City of the Caesars.¹⁷ Considering another aspect of the question, it is clear that, whereas in Western Europe folk dance, for instance, has lost all magical or invocatory character, rare is the

160 collective dance in America that does not incorporate a deep ritualistic meaning, becoming almost a ceremony of initiation: such as the dances of the Cuban *Santería*, or the extraordinary negro version of the festival of Corpus Christi, which can still be seen in the town of San Francisco de Yare, in Venezuela.

¹⁴ [Vincent Van Gogh](#) (1853-1890)

¹⁵ Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778). In [*Carceri d'Invenzione*](#) (Imaginary Prisons), 1745 this Italian engraver transformed Roman ruins into immense, fantastic dungeons with gloomy arcades, staircases rising to incredible heights, and bizarre galleries leading nowhere. Piranesi's engravings were an influence on 19th-century romanticism and also played a role in the development of Surrealism.

¹⁶ Juana Azurduy de Padilla (1781-1862), a heroine in the Bolivian wars for independence.

¹⁷ The enchanted City of the Caesars is a variant of the Eldorado legend and has incited countless explorations in Patagonia. Many Spaniards claimed to have actually been there, and numerous others went in search of it. Sebastian Cabot, who discovered the Paraná and Paraguay rivers and established the first Spanish settlement in the Plata basin in 1528, was preparing to search for the fabled city when a surprise attack by the Indians in 1529 wiped out his base at Fort Sancti Spíritus.

There is a moment, in the sixth of the *Chants de Maldoror*, when the hero, pursued by all the police in the world, escapes from an "army of agents and spies" by adopting the form of different animals and making use of his gift of being able to transport himself in an instant to Peking, Madrid, or Saint Petersburg. This is
170 "fantastic literature" at its most uninhibited. But in America, where nothing similar has been written, there existed a Mackandal endowed with these same powers by the faith of his contemporaries, and who inspired, with that magic, one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in History. Maldoror - Ducasse himself confesses it - was never anything more than a "poetic Rocambole."¹⁸ His only legacy was a literary school of ephemeral duration. The American Mackandal, on the other hand, left behind a whole mythology, along with magical hymns, preserved by an entire people, which are still sung in Voodoo ceremonies.^{**} (There is, besides, a strange coincidence in the fact that Isadore Ducasse, a man who had an exceptional instinct for the fantastic and the poetic, should have been born in America and have boasted, so insistently, at the end of one of his songs, of being "the Montevidean.") And the point is that, because of its virginal landscape, its formation, its ontology, the Faustian presence of both Indian and Negro, the Revelation represented by its recent discovery, and the fertile interbreeding it has fostered, America is far from having drained its well of mythologies.

Without any systematic intention of my part, the text which
190 follows [*The Kingdom of This World*] is concerned with this sort of preoccupation. In it is narrated a sequence of extraordinary happenings which took place on the island of Santo Domingo [Hispaniola, divided into Haiti and The Dominican Republic], in the space of a period which does not equal the span of a man's life, allowing the marvelous to flow freely from a reality precise in all

its details. Because it must be stressed that the ensuing story is based on the most rigorous documentation, which not only respects the historical truth of events, the names of characters - including secondary ones - places and even streets, but which conceals,
200 beneath its apparent intemporality, a meticulous collation of dates and chronologies. And yet, because of the dramatic singularity of the events, the fantastic elegance of the characters encountered at a given moment at the enchanted crossroads of the Ciudad del Cabo, everything seems fabulous in a story impossible to situate in Europe, and which is nonetheless just as real as any exemplary incident consigned, for the purposes of pedagogy, to scholarly textbooks. But what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?

210 * Note with what American prestige the works of Wifredo Lam stand out, in their profound originality, among those of other painters collected in the special issue - an overview of modern art - published in 1946 by *Cahiers d'Art* [Carpentier's note].

**See Jacques Roumain, *La sacrifice du Tambour Assoto* [Carpentier's note; the reference is to Roumain's anti-anti-superstition campaign writings, including this work {'The sacrifice of the Assoto drum'}].

¹⁸ Rocambole was the hero of *Les Exploits de Rocambole* (1859), French popular romances by Pierre-Alexix, Vicomte de Poson du Terrail (1828-1871). Maldoro is thus the ultimate parody of the Romantic literary hero and, at the same time, the embodiment and the destroyer of the Romantic literary myth. See Nancy Gray Diaz, note 2.