

Metamorphoses Revisited: The Myth of the Golden Age in Alvaro Pineda Botero's TRASPLANTE A NUEVA YORK

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For the past two decades contemporary Colombian fiction has been synonymous with the name. Gabriel García Márquez, however, in recent years, other writers have enriched the Colombian narrative with their short stories and novels. Among them is Alvaro Pineda Botero, author of a collection of short stories, *Altargracianos y otras historias* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1980), and the novel, *El diálogo imposible* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1981). With the publication of his second novel, *Trasplante a Nueva York* (Bogotá: La oveja negra, 1983), which won first prize in a national contest for the best short Colombian novel of 1983, Alvaro Pineda Botero establishes his position within the contemporary Colombian narrative.

Given the current political and economic problems which plague many Latin American countries and which encourage many Latin Americans to emigrate to the United States, *Trasplante a Nueva York* may be considered a very contemporary novel. It reflects the inner anguish of the transplanted individual, the restless citizen of nowhere who tries to dissipate the disquieting feelings of cultural otherness and to create a secure sense of belonging in his new environment. On a more universal level, the novel transcends the particular problem of the Latin American emigrant in its treatment of the existential questions which all men ask themselves: Who am I? and What is my place in life?

The central character of the novel, Ramón, is a native of Medellín, Colombia, a professor of Spanish in his forties, and a resident of New York City for over twenty years. Ramón is obsessed with the past, with the possibility that the

key to his true identity and his happiness lies locked away in the fading memories of the past. That the author selected the following passage from Ovid's account of the myth of Narcissus as an epigraph, indicates that the search for identity is a central issue in the novel: "Al beber, quedó fascinado por el reflejo. Amó la sombra confundiendo con un cuerpo. Admiró todo aquéllo por lo que él era admirado..." (8).

The second epigraph, "Pedazos de cristal, que el movimiento libra en la falda," taken from Góngora's *Soledad Primera*, suggests a connection between the contemporary Colombian novel and the classical literary traditions, in particular, the pastoral mode. The overall tone of the novel is elegiac in nature, a melancholic lament for a youth long past. In his study of the pastoral, *The Oaten Flute*, Renato Poggioli remarks: "The psychological root of the pastoral is a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration but merely through a retreat" (1). Ramón retreats into his private Arcadia, his big, old Brooklyn house, where surrounded by his collection of favorite objects, he listens to the daily program of baroque music on the radio and allows the lyrical chords of Vivaldi to transport him to a happier, more vital epoch: his student days when love and pleasure reigned supreme.

In the pastoral, the happy epoch, in which man enjoyed the pleasures of unbridled love and freedom, was known as the Golden Age. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes the Golden Age in antithetical terms, that is to say, that it was everything the present Iron Age is not. For exam-

ple, Ovid writes that during the Golden Age there were no laws, no punishments or penalties, no judges, no armour or soldiers to fear. Man lived in freedom and enjoyed the bountiful fruits of the earth which gave forth food without the hard toil of human labor. There was but one season, an everlasting spring with its gentle breezes and perennial perfume of flowers (31-32). In his study, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*, Harry Levin indicates that the function of the myth "is to project an attitude" rather than narrate a story (xviii). Elsewhere he writes: "it is less of an adventure than a state of mind" (26). Levin defines the myth of the Golden Age as:

a nostalgic statement of man's orientation in time, an attempt at transcending the limits of history. Since it concentrates mainly upon a prehistoric epoch, a foreworld once perfected and now lost, its usual corollary is a recoil from the belated decadence of the present epoch whenever that may be. (xv)

Levin, citing the German dramatist, Schiller, points out the universal and individual response to the myth of the Golden Age: "All peoples that have a history have a paradise, a state of innocence, a golden age," as Schiller remarked. "Moreover, every single man has his paradise, his golden age, which he recollects with more or less rapture according to his more or less poetic nature" (xv). This particular study will examine Ramón's Golden Age and his efforts to regain his lost paradise, and will determine to what extent his efforts to recapture the past lead him through a journey of self-discovery.

According to Levin, "The earliest age of mankind is associated with the verdure of springtime, with the spontaneity of childhood, and often with the awakening of love" (4). Ramón's first experience with love does not occur, however, during the green months of spring, but rather the icy days of winter. It was a snowy December day when Ramón discovered a remedy for his nostalgia for his homeland; her name was Pamela. It was a brief romance, barely spanning three seasons, but it left a lasting impression on Ramón. They met as students at the University of New York. They loved each other through the long winter months and the shorter days of spring, but by the end of summer it was

over. Pamela was gone, having succumbed to the dangerous lure of drugs. However, it was never over for Ramón; he suffered greatly from her absence and tried to recapture in memory the excitement and happiness which he had enjoyed before their relationship deteriorated. Pamela was more than a friend or lover: she was a haven, an oasis in the midst of a foreign land. She was able to break the barriers of communication and alleviate his feelings of alienation:

Porque en su primer año el amor fue el conjuro contra ese sentimiento de extranjería, fue fundirse en algo auténtico, aún más material y cercano que esos monumentos de tamaño abrumador que encontraba en la ciudad, o más fascinante que las narraciones de la guerra civil o vaqueros del oeste. Con ella pertenecía a algo, desterraba la trashumancia, se sentía recibido y aceptado. ¿No era acaso el amor y el sexo la forma más directa de penetrar en el nuevo país? (24)

After the loss of Pamela, Ramón relived the feelings of cultural shock which he had experienced upon his first arrival to this country. Pamela had served as a bridge between the two cultures, but without that vital connection, Ramón was alone in his efforts to assimilate aspects of his adopted country. He searched among the old buildings, bridges and monuments of New York City, looking for signs, for something that would reassure him that he belonged in this new land. As a consequence of his search, his native Colombia receded further and further into the shadowy memories of the past:

Allí nació por un lado, una profunda contradicción entre las dos culturas y el consecuente estigma ignominioso del trashumante, y por otro, ese sentimiento de que su verdadera patria se perdía en un pasado luminoso, que idealizó, y que a veces proyectaba hacia el futuro como un puerto para el momento desesperado en que su realidad presente se hundiera en el desastre. Porque llegó a creer que lo suyo, esa Colombia carnal con su paisaje, su historia y su tragedia, era imprescindible como símbolo pero insoportable como vivencia. Fue entonces otro de esos seres desterrados del trópico o de la

pampa, de los Andes o del Caribe. llenos de voces misteriosas. que con los ojos desorientados sólo pueden condensar sus fantasmas en el extranjero. (24)

Over the years Ramón learned to assuage his feelings of solitude and alienation through the collection of objects. Convinced that objects have a soul and communicate with those who have the sensibility to comprehend their special language. Ramón dedicated himself to their collection. He searched through flea markets, antique shops and junk yards for those relics that others regarded as useless and undesirable but which he considered: "fósiles de realidad, secreciones humanas" (48), evocative witnesses of the past. He filled the empty rooms of his house with old machines and instruments, antique crystal and porcelain, treasures from Colombia, stones from the Andes, shells from the Caribbean, and his favorite objects, his masks. The house, with his collection of objects, became his Arcadia, that which the pastoral poets called a "locus amoenus," a refuge from the hostile? artificial world of New York City with its dirty subways, noisy streets and crowds of anonymous faces. Eventually, his beloved objects came to replace Pámela, as his lover, friend and confidante:

ellas me miran con cariño y me aceptan como su amante, amo y maestro. Esos sentimientos que guardan en sus almas son parte de mi alma. Además, los objetos hablan y me revelan sus secretos. ¿Cómo no escucharlos? Ese murmullo interior... ese conversar con los objetos... ¡cosa terrible! (26)

Ramón's greatest regret is that he has scarcely any of Pámela's belongings, only a few yellowed letters, poems, and photographs, but nothing which can evoke her memory or resurrect her from the past. As a remedy, he turns to fiction and tries to write a novel which will capture the essence of their past love, however, he finds words to be a poor substitute for the language of objects:

Con los objetos que coleccionaba se sentía seguro. Pero las palabras... "¿Qué son frente a las cosas?, ¿acaso una cierta espiritualización?, ¿cómo voy a describir

esa fuerza que anima el universo y se esconde en los objetos y en los hechos?" Tenía todavía la esperanza de poder manejar algún día los signos del lenguaje, y se preguntaba si servían para indagar en la naturaleza: "es el nombre arquetipo de la cosa?, ¿en las letras de la palabra Pámela está Pámela?"

La palabra apenas rozaba la piel de los seres. (12)

It is through the nostalgic illuminations of fiction that Ramón tries to retrieve the past and to transform his memories into a tangible form before they are obliterated by the passage of time. The art of writing becomes a form of exorcism, a means of liberating himself from the ghosts of the past and from his unattainable illusions, nevertheless, each attempt to capture the memory of Pámela ends in failure. Like the poet who searches for the exact word to express his inner vision, Ramón struggles with language and considers it an inadequate tool for extracting the essence of his experience with his beloved. The reader is given the impression that Ramón's struggle with language has been a constant battle with few victories. Day after day he retreats to his house, tunes in the radio to his favorite program of baroque music, goes to his desk drawer and takes out the one 'and only' paragraph of his novel and, after reading it aloud several times, loses himself in reverie. The long afternoon hours slip by unnoticed as the diaphanous notes of Vivaldi's concerto transport him to the past, to Pámela.

Music is an integral aspect of the novel's structure. Like a composer who orchestrates the counterpoint of a symphony, the author interweaves the past and present of his character, marking the passage of time with the changing seasons of the year and the successive movements of Vivaldi's masterpiece. The music establishes the wistful tone of the novel as well. In regards to the latter, Levin, in his study of the Golden Age, comments about the power of music to convey feelings. He writes that the French novelist, Andre Malraux once was asked the question: "What does music most constantly convey to you?" Malraux's reply was the single word, 'Nostalgia,' which he has recently glossed for us with the comment: 'The great music of Europe is the song of Paradise Lost' (186).

In many respects *Trasplante a Nueva York* is a “song of Paradise Lost?” and of the futile efforts to regain it. Marcel Proust once wrote that “the truest paradises are those that we have lost (‘car les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus’)” (Levin 186). It is precisely the unattainability of a lost paradise which makes it so desirable. Ramón’s lost paradise is the period which he spent with Pamela as a very young man. Now, as a much older man, he contemplates his youth from a distance and is fascinated by the image which he sees reflected in the past: that of a young man with dreams and expectations, a vulnerable youth open to love and its dangerous consequences, a trusting soul yet uncontaminated by the corruption of the modern world. As the bucolic melodies of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* resound through the rooms of the house, Ramón projects himself into that timeless age when love and pleasure were his primary concerns. Levin refers to the timeless nature of the Golden Age when he writes that: “all paradisaical visions take place in a static world, in a time that is out of time, an everlasting spring or unending youth” (186). Elsewhere he comments:

the continual growth of plants and flowers all the year round is, according to Bacon, “the privilege of the golden age.” This privilege may be its greatest impossibility: it is also one of its most potent attractions for to exist without seasons is to be suspended in a state of timelessness which would be humanly inconceivable except in an earthly paradise” (21).

For a few brief hours Ramón remains suspended in a state of timelessness, in an “earthly paradise,” however, as Levin indicates below, living in the present and longing for the past is an exercise in futility:

Undetachably our lives stand rooted in the firm realities of here and now. Restlessness may project our thoughts in unspecified directions: “Anywhere out of the world,” to echo the phrase that Baudelaire echoed from Thomas Hook. But if our longing to escape — or more positively, to better our condition — has any goal, however dimly envisioned, it must be located elsewhere or otherwhile. Standing here and wishing to be there, we are given a

choice, at least by imagination; we may opt for some distant part of the world, a terrestrial paradise, or for an otherworld, a celestial paradise. Living now and preferring to live then, we are not likely to get beyond an imaginative exercise; but again we are faced with a double option. If we reject the present, we must choose between the past and the future, between an Arcadian retrospect and a Utopian prospect. (8)

Ramón is confronted with these very choices: to accept or reject the present. He chooses the latter and is left with yet another choice: to choose between the past and the future, between “an Arcadian retrospect and a Utopian prospect.” Ramón’s decision is a clear but tragic one; he opts for the past over the present and the future and, in doing so, misses out on the opportunity to live an authentic vital life in the here and now, and denies himself the possibility of hope for the future.

Ramón’s paradise is an artificial one, however, and the rapture which he enjoys during his daily voyages to the past is short-lived. It was Shakespeare who wrote that “the penalty of Adam” was “the seasons’ difference.” (*As You Like It*, II, i, 5, 6). Ramón cannot prolong the primal freshness of springtime forever, for each day he is reminded of the “seasons’ difference.” He cannot live forever in the static world of an idealized past; eventually the music ends and the last movement of the concerto reverberates over the radio, “anunciando una era de soledad, crimen, codicia y guerra, regida por el amor a las cosas” (66).

Alone again with his beloved objects, Ramón asks himself the same agonizing questions which have tormented him over the years:

“¿Qué he hecho en este mundo? ¿Fui creado para vivir y estoy muriendo sin haber vivido! He querido perpetuarme a través de mis objetos, pero en verdad, no he podido guardar mi pasado. ¿Es qué realmente tengo un pasado que valga la pena recordar?” (58)

In some respects Ramón’s evocations of the past result in a self-examination as he tries to discover his true identity, however, the retreat into his lost paradise is a dead-end venture because it does not result in a regeneration or renaissance of the self nor does it create hope for

the future, but rather, it leads **only** to a lifetime of painful solitude. Poggioli, in his study of the pastoral, makes some relevant comments about the retreat into the Golden Age: "the retreat into Arcadia is in reality a retreat into the soul, with no company except the self" (58). Elsewhere he remarks:

As the pastoral poet replaces the labors and troubles of love with an exclusive concern for the self, he changes into a new Narcissus, contemplating with passionate interest not his body but his soul. At this point, he deals only in Whitman's words, with "the single, solitary soul," and the pastoral becomes the poetic vehicle of solipsism. (22)

For Ramón, his self, his treasures and his memories are his only reality. As the novel comes to a close: the last notes of Vivaldi's masterpiece are transmitted over the radio, night has fallen, and the objects of the house anxiously await the decision of their master:

"¿Cuál sería la elegida?". Se preguntaban unas a otras, y la tensión del ambiente aumentaba. Había ansiedad y celos: se presentía una noche de caprichosa lujuria. Finalmente Ramón se acercó. La máscara lo intuía. Había sido la preferida del amo desde que fue rescatada de aquel sótano húmedo en donde se desintegraba comida por la polilla. Luego fue retocada, bañada con saludables sales. Y ahora compartía la alcoba de su amo. El se quitó la camisa. Y la máscara guerrera de un metro de altura sintió cerca la respiración anhelante de Ramón. (66-67).

It is fitting that the mask be the chosen object of Ramón's affection, the one selected to share his bed and his intimate hours of darkness.

More than any other object, the mask shields him from the external world, allowing him to shut out reality with its great enemy time, and to escape into a fantasy world of idealized memories. To a certain extent, the mask represents a communion with the other, a union of souls, one superimposed upon the other, however, the face which covers his and feels his anxious breathing is an **artificial** lover, a dehumanizing force which enables him to hide his true face from others and from himself. Ramón perceives the mask as his salvation, as an intimate friend who protects him from the evils of the Iron Age. He will survive with his faithful companion, the mask, but his existence will be one of quiet desperation.

As the author takes leave of his character, alone in his bedroom, his face hidden by the frightening warrior mask, one is left with the impression that Ramón will ~~enter~~ **enter the autumn** of his life clinging to those precious objects which represent his internal world and his past, afraid to take off the mask, which conceals his true self, afraid to risk the dangers of reaching out to another human being, afraid to reveal himself, opting instead for the security of solitude over the possible joys of love.

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* Revision of a paper **presented** on March 1, 1985 at the Southeast Conference on Foreign Languages and Literatures; Rollins College; Winter Park, Florida.