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Isabel Alvarez-Borland

*College of the Holy Cross*, ialvarez@holycross.edu

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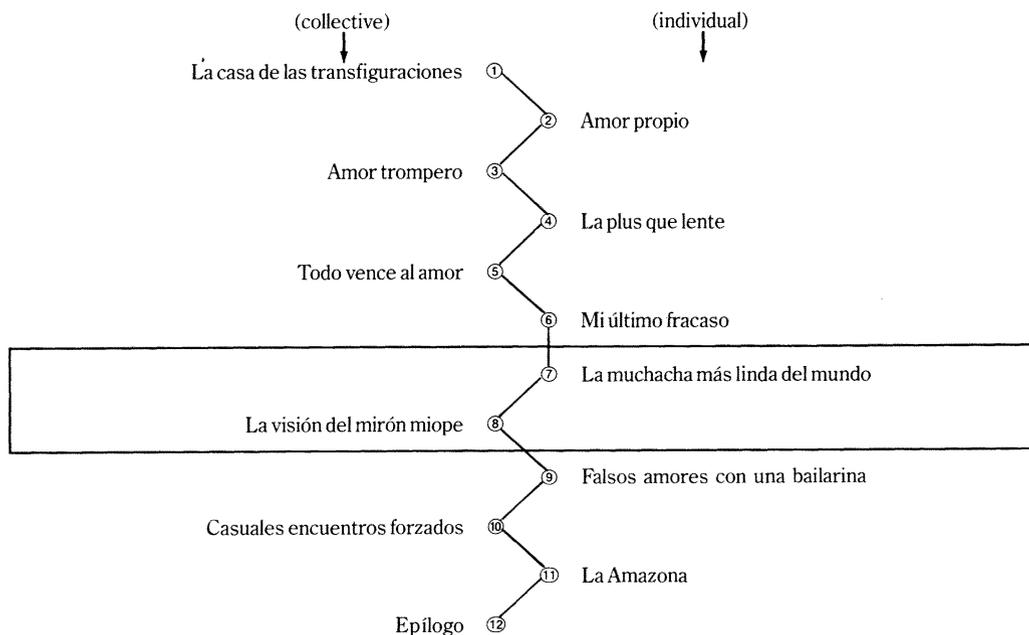
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## ***La Habana para un Infante difunto*: Cabrera Infante's Self Conscious Narrative**

It may be too simplistic to say that Guillermo Cabrera Infante's latest work, *La Habana para un Infante difunto*, represents a turn towards tradition in the author's writing style. Indeed, the text presents itself as a picaresque chronicle based on the frustrated sexual adventures of a Narrator who describes himself as an "underdeveloped Don Juan." Yet, though its external structure and apparent intention invite a traditional reading, the text's sequential development or thematic unfolding reveals a complexity which has not been critically interpreted.<sup>1</sup>

Like any other text, *La Habana* has a shape and a dynamic. Although its chapters are numbered from 1-12 and follow an apparent chronology, the critical reader soon discovers that

these episodes are of a nonevolutionary nature and do not relate to one another in a metonymic, causal fashion.<sup>2</sup> No unravelling or denouement of complex relationships is called for in *La Habana*. Instead, the work's larger pattern consists of individual episodes which have the capacity to be read as independent units. Furthermore, the chapters of *La Habana* oscillate between the presentation of a chronicle of the sexual mores of Havana in the 40's and 50's (what I categorize as the *collective* chapters) and the Narrator's exploration of his own sexual apprenticeship (the *individual* chapters). The diagram below illustrates the Narrator's trajectory between his "collective" and "individual" experiences:



The conscious arrangement of the episodes on the part of the author provides a vital background for the interpretation of this work. The oscillations of the chapters from collective panoramas to individual experiences, combined with the lack of causality exhibited among the consecutive chapters, create a unique effect on the reader. Such an arrangement forces the reader to concentrate on the singular effect that each chapter produces in him rather than on the overall development of a novelistic continuum. Thus, the text's singular ordination demands its own aesthetics, a sophisticated mechanism which will allow us to ascertain its coherence and unity.

Forrest L. Ingram's theories on the nature of short story cycles will serve as a useful point of departure for some observations on the thematic unfolding of *La Habana*. In his book, *Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*,<sup>3</sup> Ingram studies and describes not only the span, but also the versatility of this genre which falls somewhere between a collection of unrelated stories and the evolving, causal unity found in the chapters of a traditional novel. According to Ingram, a cycle must possess a unity which is extrinsic and intrinsic at the same time. The stories which make up a cycle should establish a tension between the individual story and the rest of the text. It is important to note, however, that each unit must manifest an independence from the rest, and should have the capacity to be read as a story in itself. Thus the unitive principle in a short story is what Ingram calls the principle of "recurrent development":

It consists, most simply, in the repetition of a previously used element (motif, phrase, character, etc.) in a modified form or context, in such a way that the original usage takes on added dimensions in the later context. Also, the original usage is itself affected (in retrospect) by its new relationship to an expanded context.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to what might be expected, in *La Habana* the principles of "recurrent development" do not derive exclusively from the overt, common theme of a failed search for the ideal erotic experience. Instead, the devices which unite this text and reveal its deeper unity and coherence are closely related to the craft of writing and to the experience of literary creation. An analysis of two representative chapters will show that a constant parallel occurs between the erotic experiences which are narrated at the anecdotal level, and the experiences that the Narrator

undergoes as the writer of these sexual memoirs. Ingram's theories provide us with the means for investigating the recurrent devices which elude a traditional or passive novelistic reading. These mechanisms, in turn, are intimately related to the author's reflection on his craft.

"La muchacha más linda del mundo," chapter 7, is the most important of the "individual" episodes, for it marks a turning point in the protagonist's sexual apprenticeship. Here, the Narrator/protagonist experiences what he calls the "true loss of his virginity" under the tutelage of Julieta, the "maestra." In fact, this episode receives undue attention from the author, since as indicated in our diagram, it is the point at which the text reverses its oscillatory trajectory and announces a new turn in the Narrator's erotic life.<sup>5</sup>

As are all of the women in these memoirs, Julieta is presented exclusively through the words of the Narrator/protagonist. Julieta, the *maestra*, gives the protagonist confidence as a lover, for she lacks his inhibitions and prejudices and can teach him the "true" enjoyment of a sexual experience. A liberated woman whose philosophy is that "love knows no moral" (p. 382), she provides a sharp contrast to the conservative and puritanical women of her times. In the course of their relationship, which extends over several years, the Narrator becomes erotically adept, and learns to admire Julieta not only for her sexual versatility, but also for her intellectual capabilities. Unfortunately, the couple faces many obstacles in the course of their tumultuous relationship. The need to hide their affair from Julieta's suspicious husband, and the task of confronting the sexual Victorianism of Havana in the late 40's, are major difficulties they must face. Ultimately, the Narrator's need to completely possess this woman, coupled with his unwillingness to accept a place in line among Julieta's many lovers, insure the affair's inevitable demise.

As an independent story/episode, this chapter's function is to define a relationship between two people, an affair doomed to failure because it lacks humanity. The protagonist himself is aware of the problem and communicates it to the reader: "Sólo nos unía el sexo: mi pene, mi lengua, mis brazos: mis miembros—y aunque entonces yo pensaba que podía unirnos el amor, creo que habría aceptado esa idea si alguien la hubiera propuesto"

(p. 389). The story becomes a dramatization of a relationship doomed to failure because it neglected any kind of spiritual closeness. The protagonists could only concentrate on their sexual desires, totally overlooking their spiritual needs. Their's is a reckless sexuality, an affair which not only points towards the abuses of purely physical relationships, but which also gives the reader an "ironic view of the demands and awkwardness of amorous relationships."<sup>6</sup>

In direct contrast to chapter 7, "La visión de un mirón miope" (chapter 8) is a social fresco which turns inwards. This time, aided by the Narrator's powerful telescope, we are able to penetrate the interiors of various Havana residences. These are voyeuristic episodes, in which the art of spying on all kinds of women becomes a strategy that repeatedly brings deception to our Narrator (p. 401).

A drastic change in content occurs in this new unit. The situation and the chronological time have changed, and there is no attempt to indicate causality or continuity between chapter 7 and chapter 8. Rather than concentrating on a single adventure, as in the previous unit, this chapter relates a series of similar incidents which, by their accumulation, serve to illustrate the theme of the episode. The reader is presented with a group of experiences which affect not only the Narrator, but also that host of lonely people who, like himself, populated Havana society in the late 1940's.

Voyeurism, as the Narrator states, is a "popular art," (p. 400) a kind of native passion. According to the Narrator, even the architecture of Havana's buildings, with their large balconies and emphasis on open spaces, was conducive to this activity. Indeed, Havana's topography<sup>7</sup> is, according to the Narrator, a translation of the always expansive Cuban temperament (p. 402). The essayistic tone of this episode, with its multiple digressions and generalizations on the Cuban character, gives the reader the impression of a social chronicle.

The Narrator's early experience on the roof of his tenement house (Zulueta 408) as well as his precocious adventures with his Anatomy professor, "una exhibicionista extraordinaria," figure prominently as factors which awakened his visual predilections. From the balcony of his Vedado apartment, a location which allowed him a vast visual field, the Nar-

rator finds himself armed with binoculars, ready to embark upon his solitary pastime. With a newly gained omniscience, the Narrator observes scenes which range from an erotic glimpse of one of his female neighbors to the grotesque spectacle of an obese woman, a sight which he himself describes as "anafrodisiaca, antierótica." (p. 405). Eventually, his adventures in visual eavesdropping become a disappointment that leads him to give up his indiscreet hobby.

More important than the incidents themselves are the consequences that they have for our protagonist, since his visual inclinations become increasingly obsessive. Throughout the chapter, the Narrator refers to his activities as "lonely voyeuristic inclinations" ("solitaria afición voyeurista," p. 401) and compares them to the private and solitary act of masturbation. It is important to note that although the Narrator senses his lack of communication with others, he finds himself unable to reflect on its consequences. Time after time he recalls his varied experiences, but neglects to consider their negative implications. This chapter demands special attention as an independent tale, for there is a negative progression in the prying obsessions of the character, a movement which reinforces the protagonist's dehumanizing anonymity.

The relationships between chapter 7 and chapter 8 have been shown to be noncausal. These chapters are representational in the sense that each shows a different situation and limits its development to a single kind of incident. While in chapter 7 the story concentrates on a turbulent love affair, in chapter 8 the effects are to be gleaned from the accumulation of similar incidents. Yet in both cases the Narrator's quest for a meaningful "love" experience results in total dissatisfaction.

Paradoxically, the dynamics that unify these two episodes transcend the obvious theme of a failed search for the erotic ideal and point, instead, towards the genesis of this chronicle. The underlying links unifying these two chapters (and all of the chapters in this work) can best be found through an examination of the multiple references to the creative process present throughout the text. Moreover, a peculiar situation arises as the Narrator becomes more conscious of his role as the writer of these memories than he is of his role as the protagonist. If at the narrative

level the reader finds a surprising lack of analytical behavior on the part of the protagonist, he must look for this reflective component in the stylistic concerns of the Narrator.

"La muchacha más linda del mundo," opens with an initial apology to the reader regarding the Narrator's choice of a hyperbolic title: "¿Me perdonarán la hipérbole?" This self-conscious phrase sets the tone for the dialogue that the Narrator conducts with the reader regarding his role as a writer. Everywhere in this chapter (as in the rest of the text) the Narrator expresses his desire for a transparent style, one which would escape literary scrutiny:

La tarde se hace dorada en el recuerdo pero era que era realmente dorada, las casas en el atardecer cobrando color de cuadro de Bellini, al que prestaba contraste el cielo luminoso. Puedo seguir, seguir con estas descripciones pictóricas, haciendo del tiempo paisaje, no pasaje, pero prefiero hablar de la carne hecha verba. (p. 337)

Passages such as the above underscore a conscious will on the part of the Narrator to control his words, a desire which often reveals the writer's frustrations as he undertakes his creative task.

A similar pattern of hesitation and doubt can be observed in "La visión de un mirón miope." For instance, when the writer uses the adjective "decente" to describe one of the buildings that he carefully spied on, he immediately apologizes to the reader for what he considers a "clumsy use of personification" (p. 402). The frustrations expressed by the Narrator at the syntactic level replace his lack of introspection about his erotic experiences. At the same time, the Narrator's chagrin at not finding the right phrase parallels the main character's sexual disappointments.

Yet, it is at the syntactic level that the Narrator's restlessness is clearly perceived. For example, the main thread of the various episodes is frequently abandoned by the Narrator, so that he can meditate on the effect and meaning of isolated words. If, in chapter 7, these digressions center on the descriptions of the teacher (for example, his long tirade on the effect of the word "muñeca" versus the word "tanagra"), in chapter 8, the writer expounds on the meaning of words such as "voyeur" (for which he complains Spanish has no accurate translation) or upon the impact of the word "vigilia," which would better explain his tireless, unending task of

spying on all sorts of women. In these instances, the Narrator not only meditates on the possible effect that these words may have on the reader, but he frequently apologizes and hopes the reader will understand his verbal inadequacies. A profound reflection on the multiple connotations of words besieges the Narrator, just as the sexual quest haunts the protagonist of his tale.

Similarly, the author's rampant use of alliteration and rhyme permeates the text and accounts for its unusual fluidity. The book's style becomes a unifying mechanism, a running together of linguistic elements through the alliterative process, a stylistic device which can more successfully achieve what the protagonist could not obtain at the narrative level. As the author told me in a recent interview:

Hay un erotismo que comienza y termina en las palabras: la aliteración, el mecanismo retórico más usual en el libro, es una especie de enlace erótico dentro de la escritura, en que las palabras, comenzando por la misma letra o sílaba, parecen montarse unas a otras en el más bestial de los coitos . . ."

A word must be said about the text's final chapter, entitled "Epílogo: función continua" for it provides a fitting synthesis for the two-dimensional thematics that have been explored in this study. As in many of the episodes, the reader is not surprised to find the protagonist inside yet *another* movie house, perennially looking for the perfect, anonymous, seduction. When this movie house is transformed into a gigantic womb, which engulfs the perplexed protagonist, the reader realizes that the safe, mimetic world of these memories has been abandoned. The protagonist, consumed by fear, frantically searches for an exit, after finding a flashlight and a small book. The book and the flashlight (symbolic avenues for an escape)<sup>9</sup> are eventually lost, and the anti-hero flees the womb on a flying carpet. This magic trip leads him nowhere as the text's last words "Aquí llegamos" imply a return to the book's beginning. Thus the protagonist's dilemma has not disappeared at the end, and the reader is left with the impression that his protagonist will continue in his eternal quest and that his life will forever be a series of retreats and temporary adventures.

**T**he narrative ends most aptly with two questions. At the anecdotal level it gives

us no answers—only ironic ambiguity—since literature is ignored as a solution to the protagonist's plight. The second question, however, deals with the text's fictionality as it takes the story to a totally different realm. The author's refusal to tie up his narrative neatly, coupled with the multiplicity of artistic references interwoven in this epilogue (as in the rest of the text),<sup>10</sup> reinforce once again the Narrator's concern with all creative endeavors. The reader's attention is taken away from the story-line as the protagonist becomes involved in a situation in which art and life are deliberately confused.

The text's episodes reflect on one another (see diagram) to indicate the author's sense of connection and correspondence in the design of the work. In like manner, these chapters examine and question their literary nature by means of the dialogue which the Narrator conducts with the reader throughout the pages of his unending tale.<sup>11</sup> While the protagonist as character fails to realize himself in his endless pursuit of self-indulgent sex, the Narrator uses the creative impulse as a more plausible means for fulfillment.<sup>12</sup> Whereas plot, characterization, and chronology were the main devices used by traditional novelists, Cabrera Infante's consciousness of the text's fictionality becomes the recurrent and thus unifying principle of this episodic work.

## ■ NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Very few critical appraisals of this work are available: Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Cabrera Infante: la novela como autobiografía total," *Revista Iberoamericana*, xlvii (1981), 265-71; Stephanie Merrim, "La Habana para un Infante difunto y su teoría topográfica de las formas," *Revista Iberoamericana* (1982), 403-13; Ardis L. Nelson, "La Habana para un Infante difunto: Cabrera Infante's Continuous Showing," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, V (1981), 216-19. In addition, two book reviews are available: Raymond D. Souza, rev. of *La Habana para un Infante difunto*, by G. Cabrera Infante, *Cuban Studies/Estudios cubanos*, 11, no. 1 (1981), 95-97; Antonio Prieto Taboada, rev. of *La Habana para un Infante difunto*, by G. Cabrera Infante, *Hispanérica*, no. 30 (1981), 154-56.

<sup>2</sup>Roman Jakobson, "Notes marginales sur la prose du poète Pasternak," in *Questions de Poétique*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), p. 133. In this text, Jakobson attributes to the genre of the novel a

metonymic capacity, a unity only obtained through the principle of contiguity.

<sup>3</sup>Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, (The Hague: Mouton Co., 1971). Ingram's study examines systematically the dynamics of episodic, and seemingly disjointed, narratives to understand better the principles which render their unity. A short story cycle as a genre encompasses a wide variety of fictional kinds including works which can be labeled as modern picaresque novels such as *La Habana para un Infante difunto*. On the other hand, episodic narratives which have multiple points of view and lack a defined central protagonist can also be studied as short story cycles. The contemporary picaresque is only one of many manifestations of twentieth century short story cycles.

<sup>4</sup>Ingram, p. 200.

<sup>5</sup>In our visual representation of this text (see diagram) chapters 6 and 7 reverse the text's oscillatory movement by "repeating" themselves. This reiteration can be explained by examining the narrative contents of both chapters since the Narrator claims to have lost his virginity in both episodes. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *La Habana para un Infante difunto*, (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979). All page numbers given parenthetically refer to this edition.

<sup>6</sup>Souza, p. 97.

<sup>7</sup>Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "Man of Three Islands," compiled by William L. Siemens, *Review 28*, (1981), pp. 8-11.

<sup>8</sup>Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "Entrevista," compiled by Isabel Alvarez-Borland, *Hispanérica*, no. 31 (1982), 51-68.

<sup>9</sup>Literature in this text does not have a redeeming value, at least not in the narrative level. Here Cabrera Infante appears to have in mind *Cien años de soledad*, a novel in which literature does play a crucial role.

<sup>10</sup>This text, like *Tres tristes tigres*, contains innumerable allusions to authors of varied nationalities and epochs. In fact, many of the women who appear in the narration have artistic or musical preferences which the Narrator evaluates according to his own taste. Also, there are countless parodies of famous phrases from literary and cinematic works interwoven in the narrative (pp. 530, 531, 599, 608).

<sup>11</sup>It must be noted that the references cited in this study are not the only examples of the inner dialogue which the Narrator conducts with the reader, sometimes addressed as "tú" or "lector." Throughout the book's 700 pages this Narrator clarifies expressions for the reader (p. 474); provides explanatory notes on the narration (pp. 62, 191, 195, 213); and, many times, asks the reader to forget certain phrases he dislikes (pp. 46, 77, 389, 402, 433). I might add that this is not an exhaustive list of examples.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1975). In this fascinating study, Alter traces the phenomenon of the self-conscious narrator to its cervantine roots, and discusses the reasons for its popularity in the contemporary novel.