
Message in a Bottle: Tricks of Time in *Las batallas en el desierto*, by José Emilio Pacheco

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That is to say, we throw
a bottle into the sea, which is already replete
with trash and bottles with messages.
We will never know
to whom or where the tides will toss it.
Most likely
it will succumb in the tempest and the abyss,
in the deep bottom sand which is death.
(Pacheco, "In Defense of Anonymity")¹

Georg Lukács, in *The Theory of the Novel*, states: "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). This definition implicitly poses for the genre the overcoming of no small number of obstacles, among which may be found: a perceived lack of "heroic" primary material; a generalized belief that there no longer exists a coherent, homogeneous set of sociocultural standards by which we may judge actions as meritorious or not, thus rendering the isolation of "heroic" activity almost impossible; and, the diminution of the sanctity of the public persona. This last may at least be partially attributed to rampant media encroachment into the previously off-limits domain of "private" life, making the simultaneous utterance of the terms "public figure" and "heroic" presently all but impossible. This, together with the public's apparent desire for a consistent and spiritually unifying *cosmovisión*, would seem to sound the death-knell of the novel-as-epic, or at least for the novel which assumes for its content both historical and mythic "heroic"

events of either the present or the past. Furthermore, it seems to do so unless we look for a realignment both along the content (paradigmatic) and perspective (syntagmatic) axes of the genre.

This realignment may be fueled by a variety of changes in perspective — some subtle and some not — relative to the subject matter of the novel and to its discursive form. Primary among them are: a reevaluation of the referential meanings we may (want to) attach to the signifier “heroic”; increased attention to situational ethics; and, a closer examination of the emotional longing for “epic” and how it may be molded or transformed by a society in which the need for magic and myth seems to have been replaced by an insatiable hunger for information presented in quickly and easily digestible sound bites. These changes, and others, point to the demythologizing (*la desmitificación*) of both the classical concept of hero and that of epic. This does not mean, however, that in contemporary praxis neither category is possible, only that, as literary constructs, their paradigmatic components — the ashes out of which they will rise — will necessarily be quite different and distinct (but not less valid) than those of their more “traditional” models.

Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo* (1925), Agustín Yañez’ *Al filo del agua* (1947) and Carlos Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) are all good examples of this new approach to the epic. In each — though from very differing angles — the “mythic,” “heroic” subject matter of “revolution” and its seminal causes (the classic armed struggle pitting “right” against “might,” the “will of the people” against the “tyranny of dictatorship”) is dealt with in epic style (the scene is set, the characters are typecast, the journeys are undertaken), but the outcome (no happy ending, no hero overcoming all odds to achieve immortality through glorious deeds, in fact, very few glorious deeds to speak of) is twisted, maimed. This is not at all what we expected. Instead, we are forced, by both the form and the content of each of these works, into a position of having to adopt new perspectives relative to “armed struggle,” its causes and consequences. An additional corollary to this process is that the concept of hero itself comes into question: are Greco-Roman notions of heroism at all applicable to Mexican (or other) culture(s)?

There arises a need for questioning notions of classically “heroic” action, because in each of these three works, as well as in many others, epic forms and archetypes are used as a backdrop in order to highlight deficiencies inherent in the sociocultural belief system from which they have been drawn. That is, the use of the epic format traditionally leads us to expect an epic hero in epic circumstances. When we find neither, and I would say that in these works we do not, we are forced to reexamine our conceptualization of both. Wolfgang Iser formulates this idea as

follows: “the familiar facilitates our comprehension of the unfamiliar, but the unfamiliar in turn restructures our comprehension of the familiar” (94). Hence, in this new type of epic novel, the backdrop of the classic literary form allows the text to defamiliarize its subject matter, thereby stimulating a closer analysis of events and their meanings. *Las batallas en el desierto* (1981), by José Emilio Pacheco, couples this epic device with the process of remembrance in order to defamiliarize and then bring a greater clarity of focus to a number of social issues and characteristics of post-WWII and contemporary Mexico.

In the novel, the adult narrator Carlos, in the act of remembering his “infatuation” (*enamoramiento*) with Mariana, undertakes a journey into his past, though he actually travels no further than the reaches of his mind. At first glance, neither Carlos nor his journey seems of epic proportions. However, upon further examination, his courage in confronting what was for him an extremely uncomfortable episode at the age of nine, and then reconstructing it as a forty-something adult, afford us a glimpse of one of the few forms of “heroic” behavior left to the modern world: the undertaking and simultaneous narration of a scorchingly truthful confrontation with a bleak and better forgotten past in order to understand the nature of one’s position in the present.²

One key to understanding his journey lies in its complex time frame. Gérard Genette, in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, outlines four temporal categories for all fictional narrating. They are: “subsequent (the classical position of the past-tense narrative, undoubtedly far and away the most frequent); prior (predictive narrative, generally in the future tense, but not prohibited from being conjugated in the present . . .); simultaneous (narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action); and interpolated (between moments of the action)” (217). Because of the special nature of Carlos’ journey into the past, and because of the doubling of his narrative voice between the child he was and the adult he is, the discursive structure of *Las batallas* incorporates at least three of these temporal perspectives, a strategy that stimulates the reader to construct a more totalizing view not only of the events narrated, but of the present from which they are recounted. The entire journey, in fact, constitutes an elaborate rite of passage, one which, at its conclusion, leads Carlos to a more profound understanding of not only his society, but his place within that society.³

The story begins with a conscious effort on the part of the narrator to remember: “I remember, I don’t remember. What year was it?” (*Battles in the Desert* 81).⁴ This initial evocation is followed by a litany of film and song titles, as well as of social characteristics, all of which serve to embed the episode in a very specific time period and social reality for both narrator and narratee.⁵ This form of invo-

cation and subsequent enumeration of social characteristics serves a twofold purpose. First, the narrator may need to locate his memory in a concretely circumscribed past to separate it from his present and also to rescue it from the depths of oblivion.⁶ Secondly, as the very first words of the narrative demonstrate, this is a conscious process. Carlos is actively remembering, and he is doing so for someone, though at the textual level that someone may be himself or a passive narratee/addressee who remains anonymous and undramatized throughout. It may very well be likely that as he begins his narrative, Carlos, the forty-something narrator — as opposed to Carlitos, the nine-year-old narrative voice — is truly trying to dig into his past and is unaware of the exact year of the events. As he proceeds, with data that are more and more specific, he sketches a more and more explicit epoch for both himself and his addressee, and, of course, for the reader.

The manner in which this epoch comes to light forces the reader to make connections between textual perspectives and paradigmatic “reality” in order to complete the text. For example, the exact year of the events remains somewhat vague — references to “the year of polio” (81) aside — until Carlos states that after his declaration of love to Mariana, “My mother had momentarily forgotten all about Hector. Hector boasted about being the *stud* of the university. It was rumored that he was one of the right-wing militants who forced Zubirán, the rector, to resign and erased the sign that read ‘God does not exist’ on the mural Diego Rivera painted in the Prado Hotel” (106).⁷ As Cynthia Steele has noted, this is a very specific incident in the annals of Mexico City’s history: it dates the year of Carlitos’ infatuation concretely as 1948.⁸ Hence, for the narratee as well as for the narrator, it indicates a very specific knowledge of exactly when the events of the story transpire.

The dates themselves, however, are less important than how they are used, and than how the reader must distill, combine, and recombine them to create a vision of the society and culture from which they are drawn. This is so because in much of his fiction José Emilio Pacheco regularly uses the strategy of employing seemingly trivial, anecdotal material in order to force the reader to construct an extremely complex social vision. The story (*la historia*) may be just a pretext, as is that of eme and Alguien, the protagonists of *Morirás lejos*, or it may apparently be the point, as in “El principio del placer.” In *Las batallas*, the story “is more of an excuse, a pretext, for the ongoing act of tracing the precise and certain characteristics of the surrounding reality: the landscape, the situations, the ‘golems’ of a society on the verge of becoming ‘capitalized’” (Montero 22).⁹ It is the story, then, that stimulates the reader to a perception of a wider social reality or message. Thus, as we take a trip down memory lane with Carlos we discover that behind Carlitos’

apparently trivial circumstances lie a host of broader and more problematic social ills.

It is important to note that this is, essentially, a personal journey undertaken from a private space. Carlos, for all intents and purposes, is speaking or writing to himself. The reader-listener may assume the role of privileged addressee, but our presence is nowhere indicated at the purely textual level. Furthermore, since Carlos is reliving the episode for himself, in so doing, he comes face to face with himself and his childhood emotions in a completely unmitigated (at times) form. Throughout the story, “The child who lived through the recounted events and the narrator who speaks of himself represent two distinct agents (*actantes*). The voice of the child relives his own past and the voice of the protagonist-narrator skillfully slips in a biting social criticism” (Verani 234).¹⁰ Thus, the pure, untainted emotions and feelings of Carlitos are narrated in the present tense, and constitute simultaneous narration. They are interspersed throughout the work without special introduction, and provide direct access to the events at a highly emotionally charged level. In stark contrast, the emotions of the adult Carlos, less innocent and certainly more tainted, at least by irony, are primarily in the preterite or imperfect tenses, and as such provide the tenuous safety of the emotional distance characteristic of subsequent narration. Carlos’ statements are — at times — a blend of nostalgic longing for an irrevocably lost past, as the initial invocation might indicate, and a bittersweet relief that his same past is over.

A closer examination of two episodes in particular should serve to provide a clearer view of how these temporal and narrative levels subtly blend to form a cohesive and complex image of Carlos’ social and emotional context as both child and adult. The first is Carlitos’ dinner at Harry Atherton’s house. After remembering a fight with the “trash” “Indian,” Rosales, an incident used by his father to teach Carlitos “not to scorn others” (90), Carlos begins an analysis of his family’s wealth relative to that of his schoolmates. He concludes, “Compared to Rosales I was a millionaire, but next to Harry Atherton, I was a beggar” (90).¹¹ Carlitos is invited to dinner. Carlos remembers:

We ate dinner. His parents did not say a word to me and spoke English throughout the entire meal. Honey, how do you like the little spic? He’s a midget, don’t you think? Oh Jack, please. Maybe the poor kid is catching on. Don’t worry, dear, he won’t understand a thing. The next day, Harry said to me: I’m going to give you some advice. Learn how to use your silverware. Last night you ate your filet with your fish fork. And don’t make so much noise with your soup, don’t talk with your mouth full, chew slowly, and take small bites. (90-91)¹²

The obvious irony of Carlos' English-language version of the Athertons' conversation is a double-edged narrative sword. Although narrated simultaneously in the present tense as "what actually takes place," the conversation can only be a reconstruction available to Carlos after going to school in Virginia (two years after the incident) where he becomes, we assume, comfortable with the nuances of English (116). What was really being said at the table was patently out of reach to the child, and so the adult constructs his own version of the conversation, one based on his current knowledge of social practices of the rich or well-to-do. The adult knows, for example, that, "Harry had been sent to Mexico High School instead of the American one so that he could be totally immersed in a Spanish-speaking environment and thus familiarize himself with those people who would be his helpers, his eternal apprentices, his servants" (90).¹³ Carlitos, on the other hand, can only feel uncomfortable the day after, when Harry gives him a lesson in the culinary etiquette of the rich. This subtle doubling of Carlos' perspective places the entire episode in the tenuous realm of the past-predictive; possible only as informed hindsight, but felt as if it were being lived in the present. It is subsequent narrative, but with a twist, for through it we see that the past we have access to is not separate unto itself, but instead is a version of events irrevocably intertwined with and inextricable from the present, and to a great extent informed by the point of view from which it is recalled.¹⁴

This intertwining of perspective is further illustrated in the first meeting between Carlitos and Mariana. Here, past and present are fused; the child protagonist meets his adult counterpart face to face, even if only in his mind:

Come have a bite to eat, Mariana said. And we sat down. I sat down in front of her, looking at her. I did not know which to do: eat nothing or gobble everything down to make her feel good. If I eat, she'll think I'm a starving child; if I don't eat, she'll think I don't like her cooking. Chew slowly. Don't talk with your mouth full. What can we talk about? Fortunately, Mariana breaks the silence.... She didn't touch a thing. She talked, she talked to me the whole time. Jim remained silent while he ate one Flying Saucer after another. Mariana asked me: What does your father do? I was ashamed to answer: He owns a factory that makes bath and laundry soap. The new detergents are putting him out of business. Oh, no. I'd never thought about it in that way. (92-93)¹⁵

The past tense, subsequent narration is broken up by simultaneous presentation of the action. The lessons of dinner with Harry Atherton have become incorporated into the child's repertoire as he tries to impress Mariana. His thoughts are simple, direct and somewhat uncomfortable (one can almost see him squirming). The adult voice steps in when the conversation moves beyond the ingredients of the "flying saucer" sandwiches they are eating and confronts the socio-economic

status of his family. The irony is that his father is being ruined by North American products newly introduced into the Mexican marketplace while Carlitos is falling in love with Mariana (herself not unaffected by “gringo” influence) and eating sandwiches that can be made only on a special toaster available in the United States (93). Thus, in this scene, as in most of the novel, the emotive content is communicated directly by the child’s voice: the wider social implications, however, are left entirely to the adult narrator, Carlos, and to the reader’s interpretation.

As such, it is the reader who ultimately must ask: did Carlitos really fall in love with Mariana? Or, is the story of his infatuation just a pretext, an excuse for the communication of events on a more expansive social scale? Were his emotions genuine? Or, are they so firmly embedded in and tainted by his present as to be spurious? There is no concrete, black-and-white answer to these questions. Each reader will arrive at a personal interpretation. What is important is that Carlitos believed so at the time and neither he nor his adult counterpart is repentant. The child-adult concludes, after leaving Jim’s house, that “The only thing a person of my age can do is fall in love secretly, silently, like I had done with Mariana. Fall in love knowing that all is lost and there is no hope” (94).¹⁶ He may have been forced by family, culture, and religion to put on a penitent face, but Carlos admits that as a child (and as he remembers it); “I did not regret anything, and I did not feel guilty: to love someone is not a sin. Love is good; only hatred is demonic” (102).¹⁷ There are no textual clues as to why he refused to confront the memory for so many years (116): no given reasons for remembering it now. But, this conscious act of memory constitutes a journey for him, an overcoming of no few obstacles in order to face himself — and, by direct implication, his family and his country — in the past. Though not heroic on a grand scale, the conclusion he arrives at about the episode (although not about the Mexico of those years) is a positive, almost triumphant one: “I did what I had to do, and even now, so many years later, I cannot deny that I had fallen in love with Mariana” (110).¹⁸ His personal integrity was and is intact. Whatever stimulated Carlos into actively remembering the incident, whatever his goals on a strictly personal level, by the end he seems to have achieved some sort of equilibrium with himself. The implications for his social context, however, are another story.

This is so, because, if Carlos’ narration of his journey back to himself constitutes one type of epic voyage, along the way, and not by chance, he also narrates the upward mobility of his family, its passage from the middle to upper middle class. It is a parallel journey in that the cues for its communication are contained within the discourse of Carlos’ more personal history. However, at the levels of

content and significance, its itinerary leads away from confrontation with sincere personal sentiment and towards the muddled domain of cultural contamination. At a purely structural level the text forces the reader to reconstruct the story by filling in the gaps which occur as a result of the shifting temporal and narrative perspectives (the continual fluctuation between the voices of Carlos and Carlitos), and through the insistent inclusion within the discourse of information from the repertoire of social norms and values of post-WWII Mexico.

Although not analyzed extensively here, the political realities of the Miguel Alemán regime are communicated with remarkable detail, and form an integral part of the paradigmatic content of the work. For example, through intertextual references and description of the endless parades which required attendance, Carlos opens a window to the political situation during his youth. He recounts how on an almost weekly basis classes were suspended so the schoolchildren could witness the monumental grandeur of the regime. Through the narrative filter of his adult self, Carlitos narrates the dedication ceremonies with a wry cynicism unavailable to his youthful counterpart:

As a rule, they were nothing more than a pile of rocks. The president inaugurated enormous unfinished monuments to himself. Hours and hours under the sun without so much as a sip of water — hey, Rosales, bring some lemons, they're great to quench your thirst, pass one over here — waiting for Miguel Alemán to arrive. Young, smiling, simpatico, shining, waving from aboard a cattle truck surrounded by his retinue. Applause, confetti, paper streamers, flowers ... the eternal little old lady who breaks through the military barricade and is photographed with El Señor Presidente as she hands him a bouquet of roses. (85)¹⁹

The reference to the ending of *Pedro Páramo*, whose limp body “was falling to pieces as if it were a pile of rocks” (129), recalls (among other things) the gilded expectations of Mexico's revolutionary past and the grim reality of its present.²⁰ Moreover, the sarcastic comments about the public works projects undertaken by the Alemán regime at the expense of programs of real humanitarian value to the people refer to well-documented facts and reflect one of the primary criticisms of Alemán's tenure as president (1946-1952).²¹ The quaint little old lady who presents a convenient photo-op is the icing of the cake of this description of political superficiality.

The sheer quantity of this type of information is overwhelming. From the very first page the reader is bombarded with references from film, music, radio, and politics. We see that even in “The Ancient World” evidence of cultural colonialism is everywhere. As he begins his process of remembering, Carlos transports

himself into a not-so-distant past by invoking a backdrop for the era, shot full of references to imported socio-cultural phenomenon:

Carlos Albert covered soccer games: Mago Septién was the baseball announcer. The first postwar cars had begun to circulate: Packards, Cadillacs, Buicks, Chryslers, Mercurys, Hudsons, Pontiacs, Dodges, Plymouths, De Sotos. We went to see Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power movies, to matinees featuring an entire film from beginning to end. My favorite was *The Mongo Invasion*. (81)²²

Although it is not stated directly until much later in the narrative, Carlitos' almost innocent, and certainly unthinking reverence for all products North American indicates a pervasive devaluation, both economic and cultural, of Mexican goods.²³ (The notable exception to this in the text is music.) His heroes are Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Flash Gordon and Walt Disney. His language is slowly being encroached upon by "terms that had sounded like Chicanoisms when we had first heard them in the Tin Tan movies and then slowly, imperceptibly, had become Mexicanized: *tenquítu, oquéi, uasamara, sherap, sorry*" (82-83).²⁴ Furthermore, as an adult looking back on the epoch, Carlos realizes that this phenomenon is specifically related to social class: "Only the very poor continued to drink *tepache*. Our parents soon got used to drinking *jaibol*, even though at first it had tasted to them like medicine" (83).²⁵ Those with the means and the resources slowly allow themselves and their cultural tastes (although they might not like it at first, as the *jaibol* comment would indicate) to be transformed by the pervasive influence of imported capitalist gringo culture. Thus, the financial, social, and cultural divisions between the haves and have-nots widen, with the former gradually losing all interest in the welfare of the latter as they become almost totally self-absorbed in climbing a social ladder constructed for them out of foreign materials. Carlitos' family is no exception to this phenomenon. Firmly ensconced in the middle class at the outset of the narration, by its conclusion his family members — including himself — are entirely dominated by trademark United States cultural colonialism. Their economic journey can be mapped along various routes, all suggested by and contained within Carlitos' narration of his encounter with Mariana, and his family's reaction to it.

The episode central to the description of their upward mobility is contained within the chapter titled "A Middle Ground," which precisely describes the socio-economic status of Carlitos' family at the time of his infatuation with Mariana. This middle ground is further highlighted within the chapter as Carlitos describes first his dinner invitation to Harry Atherton's and then his visit to Rosales' home to copy some civic notes. Uncomfortable at Harry's, Carlitos is repulsed by the scene at Rosales'. He may adopt social customs which allow him entrée into the

world of the upper class, but he has no desire whatsoever to journey to the lower regions where “shit floated in the greenish water” (91).²⁶ This makes perfect sense for him, as Mexico’s keen sensibility to class division is expertly underscored in the person of his mother, who “detested everyone who was not from Jalisco [and] thought that all other Mexicans were foreigners and particularly loathed those from the capital” (89).²⁷ Thus, even though his father would have Carlitos believe that “in Mexico we are all Indians even if we do not know it or want to be” (90), the subtext suggested by the more informed adult narrative voice points strongly in the opposite direction.²⁸ There are great perceived differences between the classes, and Carlitos’ family aspires to the more refined upper atmosphere.

An initial glimpse into this rarefied world is provided as Carlitos befriends Jim and meets Mariana. Jim’s much discussed parental background, and Mariana’s position as paramour of “Miguel Alemán’s omnipotent close friend and banking partner” (86), both highlight the precarious and perfidious nature of cultural and political influence and power. As an extended metaphor, Jim’s and Mariana’s involvement in Carlitos’ life also represents the first “foreign” disruption he faces. His infatuation with Mariana, and with all things gringo, presages his family’s flight from the Mexican middle class into the arms of the multinationals. In fact, Carlos prefigures his own cultural conversion when he recounts the following episode: “By the time Christmas vacation came around, everything had totally changed for us. My father had sold his soap factory and had just been appointed manager of the North American company that had bought him out. Hector was studying at the University of Chicago, and my older sisters were in Texas” (110).²⁹ His family’s socio-economic climb is complete. His mother now escapes her hated Colonia Roma and has her hair done in Polanco salon (110).³⁰ Furthermore, not only have they escaped their middle-class confines, but the children have, for the most part, physically traveled to the motherland of cultural colonization, where they can be further socialized to complete acceptance of the dominant cultural code.

The transformation, however, is questionable for Carlitos at a personal level until we see him in his final encounter with Rosales as he desperately responds to the facts of Mariana’s sudden and unexpected death. The division between the two classes — personified in this instance by Rosales and Carlitos — is apparent in Carlitos’ almost comic questioning of Rosales’ knowledge of the Plaza in New York (112).³¹ He offers to buy him an ice cream but Rosales’ hunger requires more substantial food. The familiar contact between them has been obliterated. There is no common, middle ground anymore. Now entirely repelled by the sight of true hunger, Carlitos watches with disgust as “Rosales swallowed saliva, sandwich, and

soda" (112).³² Rosales is now a means to an end for Carlitos, but nothing more.³³ As Rosales describes his mother's problems in trying to establish a union at her hospital, Carlitos responds with casual indifference: "Rosales, really, I'm sorry to hear that, but it's none of my business and I have no reason to get involved. Eat whatever you want and however much you want — I'm paying — but tell me the worst part" (112).³⁴ Carlitos has money to throw around — an extended analogy for the Alemán government, perhaps — but he no longer has any real concern or feelings for his Mexican brothers. Why should he? He will travel to Virginia and be educated in the United States (116). He is now as far away from Rosales and the problems of the poor of his country as possible. His family's journey into the realm of social colonization is complete, as is his own. The social, cultural, and emotional cost of both journeys, however, is left relatively undetermined within the text.³⁵

Carlos' narration of his past, though not autobiographical in the strictest sense of the word, conforms fairly precisely to the framework of self-writing outlined by Sylvia Molloy, who, in her introduction to *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America*, characterizes the form as "that attempt, ever renewed and ever failing, to give voice to that which does not speak, to bring what is dead to life by endowing it with a (textual) mask" (1).³⁶ For a brief moment, and for reasons unknown to all but himself, Carlos does in fact "bring what is dead to life" by means of his resuscitation of bittersweet memories of his infatuation with Mariana. However, with the closing words of his story he finally lays these same memories to rest (*las remata*) as he admits (to himself) that his somewhat ingenuous yearning for a long lost past, as well as the utopian future predicted by previous social and political regimes, is really nothing more than empty discourse. His past is now truly foreign to him, as are the vast majority of his Mexican compatriots. His cultural conversion and his rite of passage complete, he banishes his nostalgia with the invocation "who could feel nostalgic for that horror?" (117).³⁷ At the end of his tale he is finally "reborn" into a corrupt present — a present which he must face alone, armed only with the memory of an incorruptible love that could never be, and with the knowledge that there will be no heroes to save him, not even from himself. Thus, and with no small degree of unresolved ambiguity, he relegates himself to the scrap heap of the future by confronting his present with the memory not of what could have been, but what is.³⁸ By so doing, Carlos assumes his rightful place among Pacheco's many voices, all of which carry the same essential message: "I don't hurl accusations / from any height for I also / am part and product of the sewers" ("Imitation of Juvenal," *Los trabajos del mar*).³⁹ ✱

Notes

¹ “Es decir, lanzamos / una botella al mar, que está repleto / de basura y botellas con mensajes. / Nunca sabremos / a quién ni adónde la arrojarán las mareas. / Lo más probable / es que sucumba en la tempestad y el abismo, / en la arena del fondo que es la muerte” (Pacheco, “Una defensa del anonimato”; English translation mine).

² Georg Lukács characterizes the epic environment as follows: “The world of the epic answers the question: how can life become essential?” (35). One very plausible reading of *Las batallas en el desierto* characterizes Carlos’ narration as “su pugna por ser auténtico” (Steele 290). This fight for authenticity is, at its very core, a search for the essential nature (*naturaleza*) of life, and is thus intricately intertwined with Lukács’ construct of epic.

³ See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, for a detailed description of the implications of “rites of passage” in modern life (3-25).

⁴ All quotations in English are from José Emilio Pacheco, *Battles in the Desert & Other Stories* (trans. Katherine Silver. New York: New Directions, 1987). All quotations and references in Spanish are contained in endnotes, and are from José Emilio Pacheco, *Las batallas en el desierto* (México: Ediciones Era, 1981). “Me acuerdo, no me acuerdo: ¿qué año era aquél? (*Las batallas en el desierto* 9).

⁵ The reader may have a vague sense at this point that the story events are situated in the late '40s: “Ya había supermercados pero no televisión” (9). For the informed reader, however, this fact automatically precludes the possibility of any time after September 1, 1950, the date on which television was first introduced into Mexico (Beezley 34).

⁶ For example, the smooth, repetitious litany with which Dickens begins *A Tale of Two Cities* achieves much the same end by evoking a number of highly charged emotional characteristics (although Dickens goes on to mention a very specific date). The same may be said for the very first lines of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*: “Yo despierto ... Me despierta el contacto de ese objeto frío con el miembro ... Pero los párpados me pesan: dos plomos, cobres en la lengua, martillos en el oído, una ... una como plata oxidada en la respiración” (9) — which invoke a physical (and psychic) reality foreign to most readers. In both cases, as well as in *Las batallas*, this strategy for beginning the tale carries the reader away with reverie — it is almost hypnotic — and then throws him directly into either the past, or a highly disagreeable present, while being fully conscious that there is a marked division between the two periods.

⁷ “Momentáneamente mi madre se había olvidado de Héctor. Héctor se vanagloriaba de ser *conejo* de la Universidad. Decía que él fue uno de los militantes derechos que expulsaron al rector Zubirán y borraron el letrero ‘Dios no existe’ en el mural que Diego Rivera pintó en el hotel del Prado” (50).

⁸ Cynthia Steele’s footnotes to *Las batallas en el desierto*, in Steele and Rojo’s *Ritos de iniciación* provide ample and specific information regarding sociohistorical references in

the novel. José Durand, in “Años de transición: *Las batallas en el desierto*, de José Emilio Pacheco,” also dates the initial story events as occurring in 1948.

⁹ “[La historia] ... juega más bien el papel de excusa, de pretexto, para ir perfilando en rasgos precisos y certeros la realidad circundante: los paisajes, las situaciones, los ‘golems’ de una sociedad que apenas se comienza a ‘capitalizar’” (Montero 22; all translations of secondary source quotations are mine).

¹⁰ “El niño que vivió la historia contada y el narrador que habla de sí mismo representan dos actantes distintos. La voz del niño protagonista revive su propio pasado y la voz del protagonista-narrador desliza, con sutileza, una mordaz crítica social” (Verani 234).

¹¹ “a no despreciar” (24). “Millonario frente a Rosales, frente a Harry Atherton yo era un mendigo” (24). This point will be discussed in some detail later, but it is worth noting that Carlitos’ family at this juncture in the narrative truly occupies the Mexican “Middle Ground” (*Lugar de enmedio*) which happens to be the title of the chapter in which these events are narrated. Thus, the chapter heading carries twofold significance as the turning point in both the story-line (Carlos becomes Jim’s best friend and will thus meet Mariana), and the social subtext (Carlitos’ family as “*la esencial clase media mexicana*” before his father’s sale of the soap factory and subsequent employment in a multinational firm).

¹² “Cenamos. Sus padres no me dirigieron la palabra y hablaron todo el tiempo en inglés. Honey, how do you like the little Spic? He’s a midget, isn’t he. Oh Jack, please. Maybe the poor kid is catching on. Don’t worry, dear, he wouldn’t understand a thing. Al día siguiente Harry me dijo: Voy a darte un consejo: aprende a usar los cubiertos. Anoche comiste filete con el tenedor del pescado. Y trozos pequeños” (25).

¹³ “A Harry no lo habían puesto en el Americano sino en el México para que ... desde temprano se familiarizara con quienes iban a ser sus ayudantes, sus prestanombres, sus eternos aprendices, sus criados” (25).

¹⁴ For the reader unfamiliar with English, the recounting of the scene will have the exact same effect as the original episode did on Carlitos; the meaning will be out of reach, the individual words will not make sense, but the nuances will be clear. It is in all respects a little piece of narrative genius, apparently simplistic but in actuality very complex.

¹⁵ “Pasen a merendar, dijo Mariana. Y nos sentamos. Yo frente a ella, mirándola. No sabía qué hacer: no probar bocado o devorarlo todo para halagarla. Si como, pensaré que estoy hambriento; si no como, creará que no me gusta lo que hizo. Mastico despacio, no hables con la boca llena. ¿De qué podemos conversar? Por fortuna Mariana rompe el silencio.... Ella no tocó nada. Hablé, me habló todo el tiempo. Jim callado, comiendo uno tras otro platos voladores. Mariana me preguntó: ¿A qué se dedica tu papá? Qué pena contestarle: es dueño de una fábrica, hace jabones de tocador

y de lavadero. Lo están arruinando los detergentes. ¿Ah sí? Nunca lo había pensado” (29).

¹⁶ “Lo único que puede es enamorarse en secreto, en silencio, como yo de Mariana. Enamorarse sabiendo que todo está perdido y no hay ninguna esperanza” (31).

¹⁷ “Pero no estaba arrepentido ni me sentía culpable: querer a alguien no es pecado, el amor está bien, lo único demoníaco es el odio” (44).

¹⁸ “hice lo que debía y ni siquiera ahora, tantos años después, voy a negar que me enamoré de Mariana” (57). Lukács states, “The indestructible bond with reality as it is, the crucial difference between the epic and the drama, is a necessary consequence of the object of the epic being life itself” (47). Carlos’ refusal to paint his past with the colors of abject cynicism and/or denial adds to the epic dimension of his journey.

¹⁹ “Por regla general eran nada más un montón de piedras. El presidente inauguraba enormes monumentos inconclusos a sí mismo. Horas y horas bajo el sol sin movernos ni tomar agua — Rosales trae limones; son muy buenos para la sed; pásate uno — esperando la llegada de Miguel Alemán. Joven, sonriente, simpático, brillante, saludando a bordo de un camión de redilas con su comitiva. Aplausos, confeti, serpentinas, flores, . . . la eterna viejecita que rompe la valla militar y es fotografiada cuando entrega al Señorpresidente un ramo de rosas” (16-17).

²⁰ “se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras” (*Pedro Páramo* 129).

²¹ See Basilio Rojas, in *La sucesión presidencial de México*, who comments, “Con afanes plausibles, Alemán se dedicó a realizar una serie de obras materiales a cual más costosa y espectacular” (885); or Charles Cumberland, *Mexico: The Struggle for Modernity*, who notes that in 1950 Alemán’s government spent fully “18 per cent of its budget for education purposes, with a heavy proportion of it being devoted to the construction of new schools” (292).

²² “Carlos Albert era el cronista de fútbol, el Mago Septién transmitía el béisbol. Circulaban los primeros coches producidos después de la guerra: Packard, Cadillac, Buick, Chrysler, Mercury, Hudson, Pontiac, Dodge, Plymouth, De Soto. Ibamos a ver películas de Errol Flynn y Tyrone Power, a matines con una de episodios completa: *La invasión de Mongo* era mi predilecta” (9).

²³ Perhaps the most telling example of this is Isabel’s relationship with Esteban, the child-actor of the Mexican family industry. For Isabel, “Esteban representaba su única posibilidad de besar a un artista de cine. Aunque fuera de cine mexicano, tema predilecto de las burlas familiares, casi tan socorrido por nosotros como el régimen de Miguel Alemán” (53-54). Esteban’s desire to move to Hollywood, “aunque no sabía una palabra de inglés” (53) and his subsequent suicide (54), as a metaphor sketch out a dim place indeed for Mexican culture in a colonized environment; the extension being that when it wants to grow up (as Esteban inevitably did) Mexican culture must compete on the playing field with a competitor possessing unfair advantage by having — through

trickery or not — already won the hearts and minds of the spectators, and endowed with much greater wealth.

²⁴ “*términos que primero habían sonado como pochismos en las películas de Tin Tan y luego insensiblemente se mexicanizaban: tenquíu, oquéi, uasamara, sherap, sorry*” (11). Although it may be argued to the contrary, there are critics who believe that Mexican culture’s ability to absorb and integrate foreign influence is one of its strongest characteristics. William H. Beezley, in “Popular Culture,” states: “Nationalists quite rightly work against the increased penetration of foreign influence in the language, the mass media, and other facets of culture. Nevertheless, their major fear that a sombrero version of United States culture will emerge seems unfounded. Mexico’s mass culture reveals a nationalistic resiliency that absorbs foreign influence, reshapes it, and gives it a Mexican stamp” (43).

²⁵ “*Únicamente los pobres seguían tomando tepache. Nuestros padres se habituaban al jaibol que en principio les supo a medicina*” (12).

²⁶ “*En el agua verdosa flotaba mierda*” (26).

²⁷ “*detestaba a quienes no eran de Jalisco. Juzgaba extranjeros al resto de los mexicanos y aborrecía en especial a los capitalinos*” (22).

²⁸ “*en México todos éramos indios aun sin saberlo ni quererlo*” (24).

²⁹ “*Al llegar las vacaciones de fin de año todo era muy distinto para nosotros: mi padre había vendido la fábrica y acababan de nombrarlo gerente al servicio de la empresa norteamericana que absorbió sus marcas de jabones. Héctor estudiaba en la Universidad de Chicago y mis hermanas mayores en Texas*” (58).

³⁰ But notably, not in Las Lomas, which would have indicated a climb to the highest altitudes.

³¹ Likewise, this change is signaled purely on the level of physical appearances as Carlitos mentally berates Rosales for “teasing” him about Mariana’s death: “*Quiso vengarse de que lo encontré muertodehambre con su cajita de chicles y yo con mi raqueta de tenis, mi traje blanco, mi Perry Mason en inglés, mis reservaciones en el Plaza*” (64-64). Carlitos is aware of his status change, and aware, as an adult looking back (the voice of Carlos), that he alienated himself from his surroundings by means of it.

³² “*Rosales tragó saliva, torta, sidral*” (61).

³³ Although it can be argued that he, and by extension his class, always has been nothing more than an expedient means to an end since Carlitos’ visit to his home was predicated on the fact that “*Era un excelente alumno, el de mejor letra y ortografía, y todos lo utilizábamos para estos favores*” (25). Carlitos was never truly friends with Rosales, and his contact with him outside school — where it was enforced and controlled — was limited to instances of expediency on the part of Carlitos. Hence the

social norm: the poor are remembered when they can be of some use; otherwise they are forgotten and left to solve their own problems in isolation.

³⁴ “Rosales, de verdad lo siento; pero eso no es asunto mío y no tengo por qué meterme. Come lo que quieras y cuanto quieras — yo pago — pero dime qué es lo peor” (61).

³⁵ As Cynthia Steele notes: “Por lo tanto, el fin de la novela es ambiguo; si por una parte sugiere que Carlos no ha renunciado a su pugna por ser auténtico, por alcanzar un ideal utópico, también nos deja ver que, a pesar de la autocrítica irónica que permea su narración, los valores de Carlos permanecen distorsionados por las fuerzas ideológicas que moldearon a su generación” (“Cosificación” 290).

³⁶ Molloy further elaborates on the form as follows: “Spanish American self-writing is an exercise in memory doubled by a ritual of commemoration, in which individual relics (in Benjamin’s sense of the term) are secularized and re-presented as shared events” (9). Also of interest and pertinence to the present argument is the chapter titled “Autobiography as History: A Statue for Posterity” (139-158).

³⁷ “de ese horror quién puede tener nostalgia” (68).

³⁸ Thus, Carlos reaffirms his allegiance to life, though with a high degree of skepticism, and thus, his journey fulfills its epic mandate. For, as Lukács notes: “The ‘should be’ kills life, and an epic hero constructed out of what ‘should be’ will always be but a shadow of the living epic man of historical reality” (48).

³⁹ “No lanzo cargos / desde ninguna altura pues yo también / soy parte de y soy producto de la cloaca” (“Imitación de Juvenal,” *Los trabajos del mar*; English translation mine).

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