Ring Road

The Latin American literary boom, a leftist cultural attempt that failed to become a leftist movement

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Novels from the period of the Latin American literary boom generally possess characteristics of surreal magical realism. In addition, another notable feature is their non-linear narrative of time. Vargas Llosa's works often attempt this; from *The Time of the Hero* to *Conversation in the Cathedral*, linear temporal flow is no longer traceable, replaced instead by disjointed narration. Due to its psychologically structured style (with the inner fluctuations of main characters serving as narrative threads radiating outward), I prefer to call it "emotional time." In *The Time of the Hero*, the consistent emotional thread that plays a connecting role is "bad luck," followed by various memories rippling out from this misfortune.

The novel itself, as a kind of meta-style or anti-style, achieves a kind of destruction and deconstruction: all styles and narrative modes belong to a past society—that is, capitalism and its cultural epistemology and daily life—while what the novel needs to accomplish is the anti-style of modernity, that is, the dismantling of traditional narrative paradigms.

The Latin American practice is, of course, anti-modern, as its presentation of time/history is symptomatic. Capitalist modernity created a linear concept of time characterized by infinite progress, with a clear division between past and future. This ideological temporality is not uncommon in colonial descriptions of colonial history: we certainly acknowledge the cultural and economic glories of the colony in the "past," but "now" it is backward and savage, urgently in need of assistance from an advanced civilization. For capitalism, history is a series of linear plots—different civilizations always retain fifteen minutes of glory in the history books, only to be relegated to the past and then replaced by other, more modern, more developed civilizations—which undoubtedly refers to the West as the paradigm of capitalist modernity.

Thus, the writing of the colony—especially during and around the time of the Latin American literary boom—requires a non-linear temporality: at a given moment, multiple histories and times may appear, rather than a homogeneous, universal time. This is not an attempt to replace the traditional capitalist narrative with a new paradigm; rather, it simply reflects history as a series of symptoms, rather than as a kind of allegory. If under the capitalist concept of time a person is a machine, then under non-linear time, a person becomes a symptomatic reaction caused by continuously extending emotions, memories of varying weight, nostalgia, anecdotes, and so on—like photography constantly shifting focus, framing, shutter speed, and shooting angles. Julio Cortázar's Hopscotch (1963) can be considered a pinnacle among them, with a total of 155 chapters all distributed in a shuffled order. The entire work consists of three parts: "Over There" (Oliveira's life with Maga in Paris), "Over Here" (Oliveira's life after returning to Buenos Aires), and "From Other Places" (supplementary content to the previous narratives, including references to various literary and philosophical works, Oliveira's self-criticism, and theoretical reflections voiced through the fictional character Morelli). The physical flow of the plot actually

depends only on the first and second parts—that is, starting from Chapter 1, “Can I find Maga?”—a seeker’s question seemingly doomed to fail, up to Chapter 56, where Oliveira, amid a mental crisis, lingers on the windowsill, ready to jump at any moment. The remaining Chapters 57–155 make up the “From Other Places” section, which neither belongs to the past nor the present, but rather exists as a lingering spell—a historical element that is constantly being summoned back and scattered throughout the book. Therefore, following Cortázar’s suggestion, reading should begin with Chapter 73, an experience of general crisis and anxiety:

Yes, who can heal the silent fire within us, heal the colorless fire running down Chett Street, the fire licking the stones, the invisible fire peering through the doorframe? It watches us in the dark, seeking how we can wash away this sweet burn. This burn continues to spread, allying itself with time, memory, and the sticky substance that keeps us here, so that it stays for a long time, gently burning us until we turn to ashes. (Hopscotch, 73)

Starting from the universal anxiety in Chapter 73, Cortázar is able to formally enter his plot, that is, Oliveira’s search for Maga (“Can I find Maga?”). This search certainly seems to stem from Maga’s sudden departure, but if one accepts this causal relationship in terms of tense, it falls into the trap of a progressive view of time. In Chapters 1 and 2, which follow Chapter 73, Cortázar already points out the impossibility of tracing origins—there is no way to separate a past where Maga still existed from the present moment in which she has already left:

We had just met, and life had already planned all the necessary conditions to slowly pull us apart... I had long known that seeking is the symbol that represents me; seeking is the mark of those night wanderers, aimless and without purpose, seeking is the reason for those who destroy the compass. I talked to Maga about the theory of exceptions... because she had also gone through things that constantly fell into various exceptions (our meeting was such an event, many things flash like matches and then vanish)... In short, talking about Maga is not easy. At this moment, she is probably walking around Belleville or the area near Pont-de-If, intently staring at the ground, trying to find a red cloth. (Hopscotch, 1)

The past cannot be anchored, and there is no history that has already been completed; what has happened will always reappear in a disjointed, stumbling way, becoming part of the "present." For example, when "I" try to recall Maga, my memory pattern can only consist of random fragments, while simultaneously entangled with imaginations of future scenarios. This memory begins from a relatively arbitrary starting point (“At this moment, she is probably walking around Belleville or Pont-de-If”), and immediately triggers a series of associations (the red cloth of atonement, picking up things from the ground, "I" in a restaurant on Scriblue Street). These narrative paths are not completely free (like the automatism of surrealists' writing), but follow closely from the previous occurrence: wherever the narrative route leads, we must follow it closely.

In such a narrative, there is neither selection of objects nor a subject with reflective power—the subject maintains an uninterrupted, indifferent attention to the world, while the world itself is shaped and strained by a self-contradictory entity. Intense attention leads to the pure quantitative accumulation of memories—as the principle of their self-organization: everything has already happened, yet it keeps reoccurring in the present. Eventually, memory exhausts its power and begins to reproduce itself in a static numerical pattern (the novel’s ending also jumps from Chapter 131 to Chapter 58, and then back to Chapter 131, creating an uncloseable cyclical repetition).

In such a narrative, there is no implicit allegory, nor any content; interpreting it is futile. It is rather a rupture in history and the symptomatic response brought about by this rupture. The history in a physical sense is not irreversibly separated from the present; the present is the past factor that continues to exist as a force in opposition. From the perspective of the novel, this "past" is clearly the time before Maga's departure, the days Oliveira and she spent together in Paris, that is, "Over There."

On one hand, this part is indeed Cortázar's own experience. Due to his opposition to the Perón government and the ten-month scholarship granted to him by the French government, he moved to France in 1951. From the perspective of Oliveira in the book, going to Paris was for the purpose of learning advanced intellectual and cultural ideas in order to find answers to life. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for Latin American intellectuals at that time to move to Europe. Although the atrocities of European colonialism were a common consensus among Latin American leftist intellectuals, under the harsh political and cultural censorship in their home countries, choosing a relatively more relaxed and free environment seemed like a natural decision. This inevitably led to a divided mental state—on one hand, due to the identity of being a colonized subject who has been insulted and harmed, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism seemed like an instinctive choice; on the other hand, Europe, as a paradigm of civilized progress and modernization, indeed exerted an irresistible attraction in the minds of intellectuals. The chronic ailments of the characters' minds brought about by this rupture, such as persistent anxiety, confusion, loss, and forgetting, could be said to be the very embodiment of capitalist modernity itself:

It's as if a kind of internal bleeding, a beating of the heart; here, first you must feel that stupid blue passport in your jacket pocket, feel the room key hanging on the hotel sign. This is called fear, ignorance, confusion, and here, you are required to have this feeling. (From Hopscotch, 2)

The progressive experiences absorbed from Europe are ultimately seen as tools to change the weak and backward home country, which is a common thought among colonial intellectuals. This attitude toward modernity is thoroughly modernized, viewing modernity as a tool for liberating one's people that can be freely accessed. The usual belief is that if a weak and backward society can adapt to the realities of the modern world and learn how to develop in a modern way, then it can gain an advantage in the race of history. Only then can the weak society progress in time and be at the forefront of modernization and progress. But ironically, time is precisely what the colonial people cannot possess or control, as Andaya pointed out: "The transition to the political and economic environment already changed in the 19th century requires time, and one of the historical ironies is that time is precisely what Western imperialism is least able to give."

Thus, the time that Latin American intellectuals acquire can only be fragmented, broken, discontinuous, appearing as a symptom of indigestion. In such time, there is no "perspective," nor any potential narrator—naturally, there will be no subject who can guarantee its own actions. The narrative line follows its own internal logic without distraction, advancing in time, rejecting any distinction between subject and object.

But unfortunately, even this writing tool, which should have been regarded as the "weapon of the weak," ultimately failed to fulfill its purpose. Perhaps when the writers, through fragmented narratives and symptomatic reactions, neutralized any potential revolutionary subject, the infiltration of Western modernity had already taken effect: although the materials of memory could endlessly extend like a perpetual motion machine, daily life offered no miraculous moments, only tedious mechanical repetition and the characters' eternal anxiety.

The only thing that could serve as comfort was surrealism:

Surrounded by boys in loose sweaters and pleasant fashionable girls, who have read works by Durrell, Beauvoir, Duras, Dausso, Genet, and Sarraut, I am a Frenchified Argentine (the horror of horrors), already beyond the fashion and coolness of adolescence. Are you happy? My hands are full of René Crevel's paintings, my memory is full of the entire body of surrealism, my pelvis is full of the marks of Antonin Artaud, my ears are filled with the ionized works of Edgar Varèse, and my eyes are full of Picasso. (Hopscotch, 92)

It is necessary to revisit surrealism, because not only Cortázar, but many Latin American authors like Carpentier were also captured by surrealism. Aside from its alluring spirit of freedom, the surrealist movement did make some contribution to anti-colonialism in Latin America. In 1929, surrealists published their re-drawn world map in the Belgian surrealist magazine Varieties, where neither the United States nor France appeared; at the same time, Breton himself traveled to Mexico to promote surrealist ideas. This movement, led by Breton in the 1920s, aimed to break through any control of reason through the autonomous movement of the spirit, creating an absolute reality. The implied logic of this is that beneath everyday reality lies a more real reality, one that is neither mystical nor beyond the realm of reality, but rather humanistic. However, due to a series of deviations, it has been hidden behind a pre-fabricated cultural reality. It is perhaps this instinctive, drive-driven negativity that captured colonial intellectuals—this is a purely innocent movement, solely about the creativity of the spirit without needing to involve bloody violent revolution, and naturally without needing to involve the political conspiracies after the revolution.

This is indeed the case. The surrealist movement encountered internal contradictions regarding the question of whether "spiritual liberation can proceed alone, or whether the material conditions of bourgeois life must first be eradicated," and in the end, almost only Breton remained without joining the political struggles of reality (he himself was expelled from the French Communist Party). Although Breton claimed "to maintain the independence of art for the revolution, to conduct the revolution for the complete liberation of art," it is clear that the latter part was essentially meaningless. His initial communist stance had to give way to the purity of the free spirit, which also set the tone for the anarchistic character of the movement. Since taking up arms is unacceptable—after all, if the movement is to maintain absolute freedom, it cannot accept any external supervision, including that from Marxism—where does the revolutionary power of surrealism lie? If we try to find it in Breton's work Nadja, then the revolutionary power is nothing more than an emotional experience that has been stirred.

Breton and Nadja were a couple, setting aside Aragon's The Arcades Project, turning the miserable sights encountered on our train journey (as the railway began to age), the forgotten Sundays of God in the working-class neighborhoods of the big city, and the glimpses through the windows of new apartments with a hazy, rainy outlook, all into revolutionary experiences, even revolutionary actions. (Surrealism—The Last Scene of European Intellectual Life, Benjamin)

This experience does not require actual action. Can it then be combined with another type of revolutionary experience that we must acknowledge—namely, the dimensions of construction and dictatorship? In other words, can surrealism effectively combine resistance and revolution? Otherwise, how can we imagine an existence that merely engages in artistic creation in the study? If the dual task of the revolutionary intellectual is the overthrow of the bourgeois intellectual hegemony and the integration with the proletarian masses, then the latter has almost not been realized, as this task cannot be

completed through static thinking and reflection. However, this has not stopped artists and writers from continuously attempting this goal, with proletarian poets, thinkers, and various artistic works emerging endlessly. In contrast, Trotsky already pointed out in Literature and Revolution that such artists will only emerge after the revolution succeeds. But the problem is not about transforming bourgeois artists into proletarian artists, but rather that they must appear in such a conceptual field, even if it means sacrificing their artistic careers. In fact, isn't interrupting their "artistic careers" already part of their revolutionary function?

But unfortunately, for surrealism, there is no option to sacrifice the pure and independent artistic career. Therefore, even though its origins are clearly political, by rejecting an integrated collective, it successfully avoids many enemies, thus eliminating its political attributes. It should be said that the Latin American literary boom also inherited this aspect of surrealism. At the beginning of Hopscotch, Cortázar quotes a letter from Vaché to Breton: "Nothing kills a person more than being forced to represent a country."

Since it cannot speak on behalf of a country, how can it transcend the nation to represent the people? No wonder the Latin American literary boom ultimately could only slide helplessly from clear socialism—support for the Cuban Revolution—towards a humanitarian, universal relief perspective.

In 1967, Vargas Llosa, who had served as a judge for the "Casa de las Américas" Literary Prize, said in a speech titled "Literature is a Fire": "Ten, twenty, or fifty years from now, all Latin American countries will experience true social justice just like today's Cuba." And we also know that Vargas Llosa ultimately took a right-wing stance (for Vargas Llosa, the term "neo-colonialism" does not exist). It was not just Vargas Llosa; a large number of Latin American intellectuals turned against Castro. The turning point was a cultural censorship incident in 1968—Cuban poet Padilla was arrested for his poetry collection "Out of Play," which was suspected of attacking the Cuban Revolution. This event marked the end of the honeymoon period between left-wing intellectuals around the world (especially in Europe), including Sartre, Beauvoir, Duras, and the Cuban government led by Castro.

Between Europeanism and nationalism, a choice must inevitably be made. However, Europeanism is intertwined with imperialism and colonialism, while nationalism is associated with the backward and crude culture and economy of the homeland. To preserve their purity, or in Breton's words, their free and independent spirit, intellectuals can only choose nothing. Naturally, they cannot enter a political community (the "Casa de las Américas" created after the Cuban Revolution briefly united Latin American intellectuals, but after the Padilla incident, no such large-scale group with both political and cultural aspects existed). Thus, they would never truly experience the choices and political wisdom that the left had to confront when faced with political and economic crises.

After the revolution, there were no longer any moving experiences to inject new nourishment into the intellectuals, while the aftereffects of the revolution seemed so unsightly. As a result, a situation arose where magical realism advanced, retreated, and deviated unexpectedly, ultimately becoming just another "new paradigm," playing with the dead forms of postmodernism's reproductions.