

# **UCLA**

## **Mester**

### **Title**

Explosion in a Cathedral: Gnostic Archetypes in a Lukácsian Historical Novel

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8fg679wx>

### **Journal**

Mester, 29(1)

### **Author**

Hanley, Steven

### **Publication Date**

2000

### **DOI**

10.5070/M3291014532

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2000 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

## Explosion in a Cathedral:

### Gnostic Archetypes in a Lukácsian Historical Novel<sup>1</sup>

Professor Roberto González Echevarría's *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* was a milestone in Carpentier studies when it first appeared in 1977. Like any important critical text, however, it must be periodically reassessed so that it remains a text for interpreting Carpentier rather than the "definitive" statement about the Cuban novelist.

In *Alejo Carpentier*, Roberto González Echevarría makes an extensive case for a kabbalistic interpretation of *Explosion in a Cathedral*, based on a quotation that appears from the *Zohar*, a principal kabbalistic text. González Echevarría says:

By appealing to the Kabbala [in *Explosion*], Carpentier is recasting the pattern of fall and redemption, of exile and return [...] within a system that centers precisely on these themes [...]. But beyond these thematic considerations, the importance of the Kabbala in *Explosion in a Cathedral* [...] is its concern with the nature of symbolic action, its centering on a hermeneutics whereby writing is accorded a crucial role in the composition of the world—as is well known, for kabbalists the world issues from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus its presence in the novel is not, like history, an external referential code but one which attempts to explicate the text of the novel itself. (239)

González Echevarría continues by citing what he considers to be similarities between the Kabbala and *Explosion*, but neither his examples nor his conclusions are convincing. In this essay I would like to offer an alternative interpretation of *Explosion*, its symbology and the apparent anachronisms in it noted by González Echevarría. I accept González Echevarría's interpretation of *Explosion* as an emanationist work, but not theologically or theosophically emanationist, as a kabbalistic interpretation would imply, but as emanating from dialectical materialism.

Key to my interpretation of *Explosion* is the character Sofía, whom González Echevarría defines as an archetype resembling the *sephira Binah* of the Kabbala, "who is 'the supernal mother, Imma, within whose womb all that was contained in Wisdom finally becomes differentiated'" (241). Yet he offers no evidence to support his claim: like

*Binah*, Imma is not mentioned in *Explosion*, and nowhere does González Echevarría state what characteristics *Sofía* might share with Imma, or indeed who Imma is beyond a “heavenly mother.” As it happens, Imma is not a *sephira* at all, or a mythological figure, or even related to the *Zohar*, as González Echevarría implies. Rather, Imma is a *partzuf*, an element of Isaac Luria’s 16<sup>th</sup> century revision of the Kabbala that bears little resemblance to the *Zohar* on which González Echevarría bases his interpretation of *Explosion*. Luria’s is a separate, grand myth spanning the period from creation to the coming of the Messiah, and not merely a description of how humans can gain an understanding of the divine, as is the *Zohar* (Sidlofsky). This misunderstanding of Imma, the *Zohar* and the Lurian Kabbala is the first of the faulty premises on which González Echevarría bases his reading of *Explosion*.

Next, there is the matter of the *sephira* claimed by González Echevarría to represent the character *Sofía*, *Binah*. Although it is true that “sophia” is Greek for “wisdom,” González Echevarría’s implication that *Binah* is “wisdom” is incorrect, and his point—especially in the footnote on pg. 241—is misleading. The *sephira* *Hokmah* is “wisdom”; *Binah* is “intelligence” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). The quotation given by González again refers to Luria’s Kabbala, not the *Zohar*, wherein the *sephiroth* *Hokmah* and *Binah*—the emanations of Wisdom and Intelligence in the Kabbala—become the *partzufim* (“faces” of) “Abba” (“Father”) and “Imma” (“Mother”); from their union issues the *partzuf* *Ze’ir Anpin* (“The Impatient”), encompassing the six *sephiroth* from *Hesed* to *Yesod*, and representing the “judging” and “limit-setting” aspect of the divine (Sidlofsky; Congregation Emanuel).

So the “wisdom” cited by González Echevarría in the quotation “within whose womb all that was contained in Wisdom finally becomes differentiated” refers not to *Binah* at all, as he implies, but to *Hokmah*. Though *Binah* does contain an attenuated element of “the light of wisdom” (Ashlag), the text cited by González Echevarría is discussing the *union* of wisdom and intelligence—*Hokmah*’s impregnation of *Binah*, so to speak—and is most likely a direct reference to the ancient Hebrew concept that the force of life is contained in semen, which having impregnated a woman differentiates to become life.

The final serious flaw in González Echevarría’s kabbalistic thesis is that he ignores the fact that the Hebrew word *Hokmah* is an exact translation of the Greek word “sophia” (wisdom), with the exception that in the Kabbala wisdom is a masculine trait (*Encyclopedia Mythica*; Sidlofsky; *Catholic Encyclopedia*), whereas in the Greek tradition wisdom is a feminine trait. This leads to two important questions: first,

why would a character called Sofía resemble the *sephira Binah* as an archetype when another *sephira* exists, *Hokmah*, that directly correlates to “sophia”? And second, why would an author ascribe a masculine archetype (sophia = *Hokmah* = wisdom = masculine under the Kabbala) to a female character, when that exact archetype exists in another symbology, but in the feminine?

González Echevarría’s erroneous kabbalistic interpretation of *Explosion* is a critical error on his part because it radically affects his reading of it, based as it is on apparently faulty premises. Yet the matter is very easily resolved if one gives up the Kabbala and accepts instead Gnostic archetypes, especially as they relate to the Gnostic figure of Sophia, for there exist Gnostic Sophia myths with powerfully elegant resemblances to *Explosion*’s Sofía, and indeed to all the characters in *Explosion*. These resemblances can be seen through the Gnostic interpretation of the parable of “The Leaven” from Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21, which is not otherwise explained in Christian doctrine: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened” (*New American Bible* 1030). As St. Irenaeus notes, the Gnostics interpreted this parable as follows:

Also the parable of the leaven which the woman is described as having hid in three measures of meal, they declare to make manifest the three classes. For, according to their teaching, the woman represented Sophia; the three measures of meal, the three kinds of men—spiritual, animal, and material; while the leaven denoted the Saviour Himself. (Irenaeus Book VIII)

St. Irenaeus further explains:

[The Valentinians] conceive, then, of three kinds of men, spiritual, material, and animal, represented by Cain, Abel, and Seth. These three natures are no longer found in one person, but constitute various kinds [of men]. The material goes, as a matter of course, into corruption. The animal, if it make choice of the better part, finds repose in the intermediate place; but if the worse, it too shall pass into destruction. But they assert that the spiritual principles which have been sown by Achamoth, being disciplined and nourished here from that time until now in righteous souls (because when given forth by her they were yet but weak), at last attaining to perfection, shall be given as

brides to the angels of the Saviour, while their animal souls of necessity rest forever with the Demiurge in the intermediate place. And again subdividing the animal souls themselves, they say that some are by nature good, and others by nature evil. The good are those who become capable of receiving the [spiritual] seed; the evil by nature are those who are never able to receive that seed. (Irenaeus Book VII)

The relationship of this Gnostic Sophia myth to *Explosion* becomes apparent if the “three kinds of men—spiritual, animal, and material—are interpreted as Esteban, Víctor and Carlos, respectively. It is Sofía, the only woman in the family, who infuses the three men with life, who takes care of them, who makes them “whole.” That is, by metaphorically “filling them with yeast” she gives life to them, as the Holy Spirit would do, but ultimately their fates are tied to their human nature.

There is a second Gnostic Sophia myth that also has an elegant relationship to Sofía in *Explosion*, from Valentinian system as described by St. Irenaeus and Tertullian:

Sophia conceives a passion for the First Father himself, or rather, under pretext of love she seeks to know him, the Unknowable, and to comprehend his greatness. She should have suffered the consequence of her audacity by ultimate dissolution into the immensity of the Father, but for the Boundary Spirit. (*Catholic Encyclopedia*)

This is the Sophia most closely resembling the Sofía of *Explosion*, if Víctor is taken as the “First Father.” Sofía at first has a passion for Víctor and is in awe of his virility, but when she comes to know him she sees his weakness, which gives her the strength to leave him and eventually to return to her natural companion, Esteban, the martyr, for, to quote Carl Jung:

As mythology shows, one of the peculiarities of the Great Mother is that she frequently appears paired with her male counterpart. Accordingly the man identifies with the son-lover on whom the grace of Sophia has descended, with a *puer aeternus* or a *filius sapientiae*. (106)

It can easily and convincingly be argued that Esteban represents the *puer aeternus* or *filius sapientiae*—the references by Carpentier to



Esteban as a “son-lover” of Sofía’s are numerous, as are his thin, boyish looks—and, simultaneously, to St. Stephen Martyr, given his name and the fact that the word “martyr” is derived from the Greek word for “witness,” which over time was corrupted to mean “witness unto death” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*), which is, in fact, what Esteban is: a witness unto death of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Despite González Echevarría’s asseverations, I can find little other symbolism in the naming of the character Esteban; as with his kabbalistic interpretation of Sofía as *Binah*, González Echevarría’s kabbalistic interpretation of Esteban as *Keter* is unconvincing: *Keter* is “the most fundamental will-to-be that is necessary for any thought or action” (Sidlofsky). Which of Esteban’s traits or roles is indicative of such a “fundamental will-to-be”? Certainly his apparently easy acquiescence to death at the hands of Joseph Bonaparte belies a “fundamental will-to-be,” but González Echevarría is lamentably silent on this. González Echevarría further states that Esteban “is the closest to nothingness [...] identified by the absence of a name in his translations [...]” (244). But the “nothingness” of *Keter* is not the “nothingness” of a void, but rather the “lack of thingness” that is God (Sidlofsky), where “thing” is the equivalent of the Latin *res*, as in the English “reify.” Daniel Chanan Matt says: “No differentiation or individuality exists in *Keter*, no ‘thingness’; it is eternal, without a beginning. From this *sephira* all emanation flows” (34). Does all emanation in *Explosion* flow from Esteban? It seems unlikely; he merely witnesses.

Now to return, there are certainly many other Gnostic Sophia myths without a direct relationship to *Explosion*: there were many Gnostic Sophias just as there were many Gnostic systems. That is not the point. Seeing Sofía as Sophia is important to a reading of *Explosion* not because all potential Gnostic Sophia myths one might happen upon relate to the character of Sofía, but rather because the relationship between the Gnostic concept of “wisdom” and the kindred Christian concept of “providence” leads us directly to the principal theme of *Explosion*. Providence is the “Divine Intelligence itself as it exists in the supreme principle of all things and disposes of all things [...]” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). According to Christian doctrine:

The functions of Providence are threefold. As physical, it conserves what is and concurs with what acts or becomes; as moral, it bestows upon man the natural law, a conscience, sanctions—physical, moral, and social—answers human prayers, and in general governs both the nation and the individual [sic]. (*Catholic Encyclopedia*)

To see the allegorical relationship between Gnostic Wisdom and Christian Divine Providence—and thus to give foundation to a dialectical materialistic reading of *Explosion*—the Gnostic “classes of man” cited above must be compared to the “functions” of Divine Providence, for the two are similar if the “classes of man” are not taken literally, but as three aspects of the nature of mankind. This comparison is most effectively made through a similar kabbalistic concept, that of the “Trinity of Man” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*), which provides a more or less direct conceptual link between Gnosticism and Christianity:

<u>Gnostic Classes of Man</u>	=	<u>Kabbalistic Trinity of Man</u>	=	<u>Divine Providence</u>
Animal	=	Soul / Sensual	=	Physical
Spiritual	=	Spirit / Intellectual	=	Moral
Material	=	Life / Material	=	Social

That is, from a theological point-of-view, good and evil exist on the physical, moral, and social planes as a result of God’s gift of free will; the animal, spiritual, and material aspects of man, respectively, typified in the Gnostic “classes of men,” are those planes materialized.

Carpentier’s use of Sophia (not *Binali*) as an archetype as well as his choice of Gnostic archetypes for *Explosion*’s three main male characters now lead us directly to his principal theme in *Explosion*, which theme rests upon the fundamental paradox of Christian theology. As hinted at above, this paradox lies in Divine Providence itself, which:

is almost invariably connected with the problem of evil. How can evil and suffering be compatible with the beneficent providence of an all-powerful God? And why especially should the just be allowed to suffer while the wicked are apparently prosperous and happy? (*Catholic Encyclopedia*)

And indeed, this is the principal leitmotif in *Explosion*: why do the innocent suffer at the hands of Víctor, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars? There is a clear attempt by Carpentier throughout *Explosion* to make comparisons among the different religious and social systems in fashion at the time, arguing that each and every one— from Catholicism to Freemasonry to Rationalism—is equally immoral if judged by its deeds. He evokes a war of totemic and theological men, the *Zohar*, the pope, Napoleon’s crowning himself Emperor, the Masons, the Rosicrucians, and so on, and implies a fundamental immorality in the execution of the French Revolution and in the ethics of the

faithful of all persuasions. Indeed, setting aside González Echevarría's kabbalistic interpretation, *Explosion* is an apology for communism's atheism, a manifesto for communist ethics, a "call to action" and a true "historical novel" in the Lukácsian sense: an epic, with the protagonists Sofía and Esteban as the petty bourgeoisie who reject the excesses of the capitalist system they have profited from, and who die as revolutionaries disillusioned with one false and failed revolution, compelled to act in what would be another.

In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács says: "What is the aim of the historical novel? First, it is to portray the kind of individual destiny that can *directly* and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch" (284) to present "objective reality" "from below," through a "concrete relationship with the present,"

[f]or the people experience history directly. History is their own upsurge and decline, the chain of their joys and sorrows. If the historical novelist can succeed in creating characters and destinies in which the important social-human contents, problems, movements, etc., of an epoch appear directly, then he can present history "from below," from the standpoint of popular life. (285)

And:

[Characters must] appear eccentric from a social standpoint [...]. But the decisive thing is the social and psychological content of the particular personal destiny; that is, is this destiny inwardly connected with the great, typical questions of popular life or not? (284)

Take these basic aspects of the Lukácsian Historical Novel and add to them two simple elements of Marxist thought—that the advent of communism is a process, and that it is inevitable—and *Explosion* becomes a coherent work apparently bereft of anachronisms, which demonstrates a certain genius of construction. For in *Explosion*, whether he set out to follow Lukács's model or not, Carpentier presents a historical event—the French Revolution and its aftermath—in the same communist terms that Lukács espouses: the sufferings of "the people" are shown through the vehicle of socially eccentric characters whose personal destinies are tied to the events in which they are involved. Esteban first, then Sofía, do not experience revolution as normal mem-



bers of their caste might: Esteban is tossed into the tumult of war by chance, and his role is that of witness to its excesses; Sofía embraces revolution against Napoleon after she sees firsthand the failings of her lover, Víctor, and as a result the failings of the revolution itself. Carpentier's choice of Gnostic archetypes naturally supports the express and implied criticisms in the text of all failed religious and social systems, while at the same time neatly pointing out human weaknesses and foibles, and leading inexorably to an unspoken espousal of communistic atheism. And the excesses of the French Revolution itself point toward the "process" of Revolution: Marx says in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, written 40 long years after the close of *Explosion*: "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers" (Chapter 1). The French Revolution, though flawed and failed, was a *necessary* revolution; the Cuban Revolution, contemporaneous with the writing of *Explosion*, would be just another step in the universal revolutionary process. Lukács concludes *The Historical Novel* by saying that, "Today's historical novel has arisen and is developing amid the dawn of a new democracy [...] the Soviet Union, [which has] [...] produced the highest form of democracy in human history, Socialist democracy" (344). In this sense, Víctor Hugues represents a further failure in that process: a failed revolutionary, devoid of a moral basis and carried away by the excesses of power. He is a *petit* Stalin, or an "animal man." And Carlos, the merchant, is the personification of "material man": far from González Echevarría's claim that Carlos will inescapably lead an uprising in Cuba, I believe he will most likely suffer the fate of the Gnostic "material man" and go, "as a matter of course, into corruption." Certainly nothing in his dispassionate acceptance of Sofía's and Carlos's deaths at the end of the novel indicates otherwise: he doesn't seem about to muster an angry mob thirsting to avenge them.

Indeed, I believe that in *Explosion* Carpentier tells us whom "Carlos" refers to and how he will wind up; rather than referring to Carlos Manuel de Céspedes as González Echevarría claims, who "declared his slaves free and marched against the Spaniards in Cuba" (232), that is, who continued the revolution interrupted by Napoleon, in *Explosion* Carpentier cites another "Charles," St. Carlo Borromeo, who along with St. Roch and St. Prudentius, "were always remembered in time of pestilence" in Cayenne (331). Now as it happens, of the aforementioned three saints only St. Roch is defined as a "miracle-working saint" by the Catholic Church (*Catholic Encyclopedia*), having

worked miracles during the Black Death. Prudentius isn't a saint at all according to the Bollandists (*Catholic Encyclopedia*), the Jesuit group charged with keeping the *Acta Sanctorum*, "the great collection of biographies and legends of the saints" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*), but was a lawyer who wrote poems on Spanish martyrs and attacked "the Gnostic dualism of Marcion and his followers" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). I believe he is included by Carpentier for this reason and for the fact that his name is derived from *prudentia*, which is "contracted from *providentia*" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*), or "providence," as I discuss above. Otherwise, why would a non-miracle-working non-saint be remembered in time of pestilence? For his part, St. Carlo Borromeo was "one of the chief factors in the Catholic Counter-Reformation," and although he was known to minister to the plague-stricken (*Catholic Encyclopedia*) as would many priests in his day, he is not considered a miracle worker. He believed the plague to be chastisement for sin (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). His main contribution to the Church was as a leader of the Counterreformation, so again there would be no reason for him to be invoked during the Egyptian Disease unless the pathogen is not a bacillus, but revolution and apostasy. Tellingly, the last saint Carpentier adds to this list of intercessors is St. Sebastian, (333), who is considered a protector against the plague (*Catholic Encyclopedia*); thus Prudentius and St. Carlo Borromeo are obviously out of place. So if *Explosion's* Carlos is St. Carlo Borromeo, then he will inescapably lead a counterreformation against the Spanish War of Independence started with the uprising in which Sofía and Esteban die; he will defend the status quo after the restoration of King Ferdinand VII. This interpretation agrees with Carpentier's own, that Carlos is a person "in whom the ideal does not outlast his reaching twenty-five or twenty-six, when the need to make a living, to look after his business, bourgeoisify him" (Shaw 85).

Now with respect to the anachronisms González Echevarría cites, and ignoring the extremely relevant philosophical question as to whether anachronisms can exist at all in works written in the omniscient point-of-view, a matter which González Echevarría does not discuss, he first cites the presence of bits of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* woven into the text of *Explosion*; the inclusion of the *Manifesto* is no surprise, however, and certainly not anachronistic, because the story is about the historical process of revolution, and not about the events that are being recounted. That is, History is the protagonist of *Explosion*, and History, like Myth, is timeless. Then the reference to paintings of "monsters" and the like may relate directly to Goya—considered by many to be a

“revolutionary” painter and the father of modern art—especially his “Black Paintings” and his series of etchings, *Los Caprichos*, which are contemporaneous with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Certainly Goya’s painting *The 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1808: The Execution of the Defenders of Madrid* relates directly to chapter 7 of *Explosion*, for the event therein depicted would be the one in which Sofía and Esteban die; this is borne out by the presence of an epigraph by Goya in the second, unnumbered subchapter of chapter 7: “*Así sucedió,*” or “thus it happened” (Carpentier 343). Also the epigraph “*Fiero monstruo*” (229), or “monstrous beast,” again attributed to Goya, with indisputable apocalyptic overtones.

If History is the protagonist of *Explosion* as I posit, then one of *Explosion*’s subsidiary themes would be that, as the saying goes, “history repeats itself.” So although “astral horses” may be surrealist visions in our day, they are also apocalyptic visions, quite relevant to a novel with religious overtones like *Explosion*. The interpretation of dreams cited by González Echevarría is more than a 1900 work by Sigmund Freud; dreams and dream images appear throughout the Bible, from Jacob in Genesis 28 to the Apocalypse; given my hypothesis, the presence of dreams in the book is certainly relevant, and their interpretation is not anachronistic at all, but something people have done “since forever.” And according to Matt, “automatic writing” is more than a technique of surrealism:

Parts of the *Zohar* may have been composed by automatic writing, a technique that is well attested in the history of mystical literature. Joseph Abulafia, an acquaintance of Moses [de León’s], possessed “the writing name, a holy name that focused meditation and placed one in a trance in which automatic writings were produced.” (27)

As a result, its mention in *Explosion* should come as no surprise, especially to González Echevarría, given his kabbalistic take on the piece. And of course, like the quotations from *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the allusions to “class struggles” cited by González Echevarría are not anachronistic at all in *Explosion*, because revolution is the very point of the book, and even if the term “class struggle” had not yet been coined, legend has it that Marie Antoinette did notice the egalitarian underpinnings of the French Revolution, or at least class differences in diet. However, González Echevarría’s comment that “Sofía’s decision to ‘do something’ at the end of the novel” is “post-

Sartrean" is an exaggeration: following that logic, one could also say that Don Quixote's decision to become a fantastical knight-errant is "post Sartrean," given the plight of women in his day. Although I believe that Sofía's "decision to do something" is her answer to Marx's call to arms, I do agree with González Echevarría's conclusion that:

[t]he anachronisms perform the function of pointing at the density of the historical field encompassed by the text, which integrates the past and the future on a single horizontal level. (236)

if the anachronisms are not viewed as such, but rather as a sort of omniscient "flash forward" indicating to the reader what the novel is really about: the inevitable process of history, or "where we've been headed."

Carpentier's use of such flash forwards from the main action of *Explosion* is balanced by his more subtle use of flashbacks, if his employment of Gnostic archetypes is seen as a flashback from Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, both of which play an integral role in the "current action" of *Explosion*. And indeed, these flashbacks and flash forwards are reflected in the very structure of the novel. Although the prologue is technically a flash forward in that it is an event that occurs after the events of chapter 1, it has the feel of a flashback: besides being written in the past tense, unlike the rest of the book it is written in the first person, so it "feels" like an interior monologue or a journal entry that should be inserted when Esteban, who has presumably composed it, is on a ship navigating the Caribbean. It is balanced, then, by the final chapter, 7, which despite being a flash forward in that it is outside the unity of action of the body of the novel—it moves to Carlos' determining the fate of Sofía and Esteban in the days just prior to the Spanish War of Independence, and does so for no apparent reason of causality—is actually a type of flashback whose purpose is to reconstruct the events of May 2, 1808. Indeed, what appears to be the second subchapter of chapter 7 is not a subchapter but, in fact, the epilogue that balances the prologue: the first part of chapter 7 continues in the omniscient point-of-view, and refers to Carlos as "the traveler"; the second part, however, is written in the third person, is limited to Carlos' point-of-view, and calls Carlos "Carlos." Like the prologue, then, it breaks the epic structure of *Explosion*: it changes point-of-view while oddly completing the novel's structural implementation of historical flashbacks and flash forwards.



I believe González Echevarría comes closest to discerning Carpentier's sense of History in *Explosion* when he says, "But what is peculiar about the future evoked in *Explosion in a Cathedral* is its quality of being simultaneously a past" (234), which comment agrees not only with my thesis, but with the third sentence of *Explosion*, wherein Esteban (we assume) discusses the erecting of the guillotine in that passage, cited above, that has the "feel" of a flashback:

Time stood still, caught between the Pole Star, the Great Bear and the Southern Cross—though I do not know, for it is not my job to know, whether such in fact were the constellations, so numerous that their vertices, their sidereal fires, mingled and combined, shuffling the allegories they symbolized. (Carpentier 7)

Time is History, which in turn is "timeless" because it is eternal: all history exists as a whole and at once, as an Aristotelian "unity of action." The constellations—be they the Zodiac or the lights of the *Zohar* or the "sons of heaven" of Genesis 6:1, or any other—are also timeless, and we have ascribed meaning to them, which meaning is systematized in orthodoxy and heresy alike, and which systematization communism seeks to overturn. That is, historically we have sought our answers in the stars, but the answers aren't there. They lie elsewhere.

In *Explosion* Carpentier seems to ask, "Where have we come from and where are we going, and what's the difference between the two?" The answer to the latter, presumably, is communism. Thus, like González Echevarría, I see significance in Esteban's contemplation of the shell on the beach, but I interpret the spiral of the shell as 1) an emanation, and 2) inevitability. That is, the spiral symbolizes Marx's inevitable march of history from feudalism toward communism—its "emanation," if you will—and I would liken it to the relentless crescendo of Ravel's "Bolero." And Esteban's contemplation of the guillotine would represent the failure of revolutions past, and the French Revolution in particular, to resolve adequately the conflict of the social classes caused, according to Marx, by man's material needs, and not, as González Echevarría claims, with the guillotine as "an arbitrary threshold in the endless void" (252). Here I agree with Shaw, who states that the guillotine "introduces symbolically an aspect of the theme: the price in terror and death exacted by radical social change" (83–84).

It is, however, as González Echevarría continues to deepen his kabbalistic allegory that he is on the thinnest ice, especially when he



asserts that *Explosion* is “a hermeneutics whereby writing is accorded a crucial role in the composition of the world” (239). This seems the weakest of all his points: González Echevarría’s attempts at applying a principal hermeneutical method of the Kabbala—*Gematriah*, the assignation of numerical values to Hebrew letters to divine hidden meanings—to the chapters and subchapters of *Explosion* is entirely unsupported, and what arguments are given are unconvincing. The principal hermeneutical methods of the Kabbala, besides *Gematriah*, are *Temurah*, the interchange of Hebrew letters, and *Notarikon*, the reconstruction of a word using Hebrew initials; they were designed to support the notion that the Kabbala is contained within the text of the Hebrew scriptures, but it is revealed by God only to those who are knowledgeable in these methods (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). What hidden meaning is contained in *Explosion* that can be revealed by the techniques of *gematriah*, *temurah*, and *notarikon*? González Echevarría does not say because, I think, there is none.

It is best to limit our interpretation of the *Zohar*’s presence in *Explosion* to the fact that the word means “splendor” (“light”); it is derived from Genesis 1:3: “Let there be light” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*); the Spanish title of *Explosion* is *El siglo de las luces*, or “the century of lights”; and the concept of “enlightenment”, or lack of it, is what Carpentier depicts by choosing the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars as his subjects. We also mustn’t forget that the “Kabbala is a simple and accurate method which investigates and defines man’s position in the universe” (Bnei Baruch), and *Explosion* is not about that at all. It is, in fact, about the opposite of that. It is about the image of the painting *Explosion in a Cathedral*, which is the image of the destruction of a temple, and communism is seen by Marx as the destruction of the temples of capitalism, bourgeois democracy and religion.

González Echevarría states that *Explosion* is a “reassessment of an eighteenth-century problematics [...] that could be defined as the search for the common source of all symbolic activity, the master code of the universal mind” (226). Far from being an 18<sup>th</sup> century problem, the search for the “master code of the universal mind” is an eternal human quest: the kabbalistic invocations González Echevarría sees in *Explosion* have their immediate origins in Gnosticism and neoplatonism, and their more remote origins in the *Upanishads* and before, and have influenced later movements such as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Christian Science and the New Age movement, among others. If *Explosion* is anything, then, it is a reassessment of revolutions as seen in the light of the revolutionary process, whether regarding

political, social, moral, economic, theological, artistic or any other type of revolution in which mankind has found itself involved. And if Carpentier has innovated as a writer, it is not in his construction of a "hermeneutics whereby writing is accorded a crucial role in the composition of the world," but rather it is that, in the construction of *Explosion*, he has succeeded in destroying the temple of History and our time-honored reliance on the stars.

—Steven Hanley  
Columbia University

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ahamoth refers to fallen Wisdom (Sophia), who after her attempt to know God the Father without the intervention of Christ was condemned to a lower realm. "She is the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Revelation 21:9-10) and the lost sheep of the parable (Matthew 18:11-14)" (Brons).

## WORKS CITED

- Ashlag, Y. *The Teachings of the Ten Sefirot Part A: The Inner Reflection*. Trans. I. Krakovski. 13 January 2000. <[http://kabbalah-web.org/engkab/inner\\_reflection.htm](http://kabbalah-web.org/engkab/inner_reflection.htm)>.
- Bnei Baruch. *Kabbala and Zohar: A Beginner's Guide to Kabbala*. 13 January 2000. <<http://kabbalah-web.org/engkab/kosemeng.htm>>.
- "Bollandist." *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD 99*. CD-ROM. Multimedia Edition, 1999.
- "Borromeo, St. Charles." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume III. 1908. Online edition 1999. 25 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03619a.htm>>.
- Brons, D. *Valentinian Theology: The Myth of the Fall of Wisdom (Sophia)*. 1998. 13 January 2000. <<http://www.cyberus.ca/~brons/myth.htm>>.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *Explosion in a Cathedral*. Trans. J. Sturrock. 1963. New York: The Noonday Press, 1989.
- Congregation Emanu-El of New York City. *Bulletin*. "The Sefirot, The Soul, The Self Glimpses Into Jewish Mysticism." 15 January 2000. <<http://www.emanuelnyc.org/bulletin/archive/114.html>>.
- "Gnosticism." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume VI. 1909. Online edition 1999. 16 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06592a.htm>>.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim At Home*. 1977. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990.

- Irenaeus. *Adversus Haereses*. Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Excerpted from Volume I of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. American Edition 1885. Electronic version 1996. New Advent, Inc. 17 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>>.
- Jung, Carl. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 1959, 1969. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX: The Collected Works of C.G. Jung. Volume 9, Part 1. Eds. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, and William McGuire. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968.
- "Kabbala." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume VIII. 1910. Online edition 1999. 16 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08590a.htm>>.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.
- "Martyr." *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD 99*. CD-ROM. Multimedia Edition, 1999.
- Marx, Karl and Fredrick Engels. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. 1848. Canberra, Australia: The Australian National University. 16 January 2000. <<http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>>.
- Matt, Daniel Chanan. Introduction. *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*. Trans. Daniel Chanan Matt. New York: Paulist Press. 1983. 1 – 39.
- New American Bible For Catholics, The*. Washington, D.C.: The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1970.
- "Providence, Divine." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume XII. 1911. Online edition 1999. 16 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12510a.htm>>.
- "Prudence." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume XII. 1911. Online edition 1999. 25 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12517b.htm>>.
- "Prudentius." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume XII. 1908. Online edition 1990. 16 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12518a.htm>>.
- "Prudentius." *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD 99*. CD-ROM. Multimedia Edition, 1999.
- "Roch, Saint." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume XIII. 1912. Online edition 1999. 16 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13100c.htm>>.
- "Sebastian, Saint." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Volume XIII. 1912. Online edition 1999. 27 January 2000. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13668a.htm>>.
- Shaw, Donald L. *Alejo Carpentier*. Twayne's World Authors Series: Latin American Literature. Ed. David Foster. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1985.

Sidlofsky, Michael. *Kavannah: Resources for Kabbala and Jewish Meditation*. "The Sefirot: The Problem: Connecting to God." 13 January 2000. <<http://kavannah.org/sefirot.html>>.

"Sophia." *The Encyclopedia Mythica: An Encyclopedia on Mythology, Folklore, and Legend*. M.F. Lindemans. 1995-1999. 13 January 2000. <<http://www.pantheon.org/mythica/articles/s/sophia.html>>.