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# GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ ON THE MARGIN OF UTOPIA

by Peter G. Earle

In García Márquez there is a utopian longing which is almost contradicted by his grim political overview. Nevertheless, in many of his novels and stories he leaves us little escapeways of hope. Remember the ending of *The Autumn of the Patriarch*: bells toll, rockets burst in the air and people cheer when it is discovered that the dictatorial protagonist has sneezed himself to death. There's a chance that the Colonel's renowned rooster (*Nobody Writes to the Colonel*) will win on the day of its great test, 45 days after the novelette's conclusion.<sup>1</sup> In Aureliano Babilonia, who dies in the hurricane that sweeps Macondo from the map and from human memory and who begets with Amaranta Ursula the last of the Buendia line, there's a suggestion of potential salvation. Aureliano—the last and littlest Aureliano—was the only Buendia conceived in the plenitude of love. And his father, Aureliano Babilonia, was in turn a foundling, the natural child of a proletarian, the apprentice mechanic Mauricio Babilonia, and Renata Remedios (alias Meme) Buendia. Aureliano Babilonia, the lover of learning, is also the descendant most faithful to historical truth, the one who persists in preserving for posterity the circumstances of the banana workers' massacre of 1928, of Colonel Aureliano Buendia's stature and strength as the leader of 32 revolutionary uprisings, and his pride in his own identity. And he's the last curator and scholar of the Melquiades manuscripts, in which the eternal defense against oblivion is written.

Oblivion, of course, ruins history, just as it is often used to conceal social and political outrages. In the first half of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* there is an epidemic of oblivion, with sporadic, individual recurrences. In the second half of the novel, however, it become systematized, and certain situations and events, like the banana workers' massacre, are made out to be apocryphal: by the central government, by the army, by Mr. Brown the banana entrepreneur, who even orders a storm that lasts four years, eleven months and two days to help wash away the collective memory. García Márquez, of course, is not the only Hispanic American writer to have shrouded utopia in such irony. In this regard his superphysical Macondo is comparable to Borges' metaphysical Tlön and to Vargas Llosa's Amazonian playground, Pantilandia. As Huxley and Orwell knew there will always be something in the historical air which tends to warp utopias into counter-utopias. History is usually written with certain systematic ideals in mind, while life evolves as a series of trials and blunders aggravated by love, resentment, ambition, or fear. Narrative literature in Hispanic America is the juxtaposition of history as it is written and life as it evolves. García Márquez celebrates that juxtaposition in the festival atmosphere of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and "Big Mama's Funeral," in the political nightmare of *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, and in "the system of social decomposition" described in *The Evil Hour*. The celebration, of course, reaches its climax in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

In chapter 11 of that work Colonel Aureliano Buendia's 17 bastard sons arrive from their respective places to visit the old man for the first time. One of them,

Aureliano Triste, moves to the outskirts of Macondo and builds there an ice factory that his grandfather had already dreamed about in the novel's first pages. Aureliano Triste and Aureliano Centeno (another of the 17) expand the ice business and with Aureliano Segundo's help bring the first railroad to Macondo. Chapter 11 ends as Aureliano Triste drives the first locomotive, pulling the first yellow train behind it, into town. The train would bring machinery and an electric power plant. It would bring a smiling North American balloon salesman and banana expert, to be followed later by a colony of his compatriots. It was the entrepreneurial invasion to which Garcia Márquez pays this homage:

Endowed with means that had been reserved for Divine Providence in former times, they changed the patterns of the rains, accelerated the cycle of the harvest, and moved the river from where it always had been and put it with its white stones and icy currents on the other side of town behind the cemetery.<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of the book Macondo had gone through the successive phases of insomnia, amnesia and memory regained. The gypsies had come and gone several times. Civil wars had flared up and fizzled out. Colonel Aureliano Buendia had built up a following of sorts. Life was flexible; people had the feeling they were living in a perpetual present, in which they could continually indulge themselves.

In the second half outsiders took over. First came Fernanda del Carpio from the highlands; then, Colonel Aureliano Buendia's prodigal though illegitimate sons; then the North Americans with their bluegrass lawns and banana plantations. France would contribute a trainload of exotic prostitutes; and the Turks would arrive to set up bazaars, shooting galleries and gaming tables, and a whole alley with stands where dreams could be interpreted and the future predicted. In the second half, also, the ecclesiastical gloom of the del Carpios progressively displaces the Buendias' social exuberance. Ursula Iguarán, who had managed everything and had always kept doors and windows open in the hospitable ancestral home, loses her eyesight, much of her influence, and a good part of her mind.

In the end, Macondo is blown away and "erased from men's memory" by a hurricane. Might that occurrence be used, although Garcia Márquez himself was probably not thinking of it, as an appendix to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, in which it is written that the Old World has history and geography but the New World has only geography?<sup>3</sup> Well, the temporal and spatial elimination of Macondo *was written* in the parchments of Melquiades the Prophet, who had come to the town in its earliest days and returned in resurrected or ghost form many times after. Macondo disappears, men's memory of it vanishes, and Aureliano Babilonia dies at the precise moment he reads the last verse in the parchments. Thus, the magic of life in Macondo is not only preordained by the magic in Melquiades' text; in the end they're simultaneous.

One is tempted to read into this cataclysmic convergence and the sum of many other episodes of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the workings of fantasy. But that, according to the author, would be a mistake. In *El olor de la guayaba*, an interview with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, he openly disdains the art of fantasy: "I believe that the imagination is no more than an instrument for the elaboration of reality. . . . The source of creation, after all, is always reality. And fantasy—that is, pure and simple

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fantasy, in the manner of Walt Disney—is more despicable than anything.” When asked to name the strongest single influence on his work, Garcia Márquez was quick to answer: “my imperturbable grandmother.” Then he says, notwithstanding his low opinion of fantasy, that Kafka appealed to him at an early age because in stories like “The Metamorphosis” he had found his grandmother’s straight-faced audacity. Kafka, and his grandmother, had shown him that in story-telling anything is possible.<sup>4</sup>

Anything is possible. That is, reality is a gold mine of possibilities, and magic can best be defined as a full celebration of the physical world. In the beginning I thought of giving these remarks the title “One Hundred Years of Somatotonia.” Somatotonia is identified in dictionaries of psychology as a personality type arising from a relationship between the physical and the temperamental, revealing a predominance of biological over intellectual factors and expressing aggressiveness, love of physical activity, vigor and alertness. One could go so far as to say that somatotonia makes the solitude of Macondo bearable, at the same time that it ruins rational political development. Colonel Aureliano Buendia’s *machismo* (he sires 17 children—all males and all named Aureliano—with 17 anonymous females) is a parody-symbol of political energy in the context of personalism and violence. The implacable Colonel, who died while urinating against the same chestnut tree that shaded the founder of Macondo in the crepuscular years of his madness, foreshadows the Patriarch of Garcia Márquez’s later novel, who proclaimed himself General of the Universe, who fathered an estimated 5,000 offspring, all prematurely born, and whose principal birth defect—an overgrown perforated scrotum—whistled while he walked. In the above-mentioned interview Garcia Márquez recalls that Henry Kissinger defined power as the greatest aphrodisiac. History, says the creator of the Patriarch, shows that the power-hungry live in a kind of sexual frenzy; he further states that his seminal idea in writing *The Autumn of the Patriarch* was that power, or the desire of power, ultimately replaces love in the human male.

Critics and theorists have searched wide for an explanation of what goes on in works like these. If we can set aside for a moment the complex semiotic evidence of metafiction, fabulation and discourse, I’ll offer a simpler formula. What the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue of the early 1900’s was to the rural American mail-order customer, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is to the inquiring reader of novels in the late 1900’s. As in the great catalogue, a little of everything can be found in the novel’s magic space: a flying carpet; an elixir to make things invisible; a magnet which, dragged down the street, pulls pots and pans and other metal objects from their places in houses all along the way; a young man who’d been transformed into a snake for disobeying his parents; a woman who could read the past in a pack of cards; and—of course—Fernanda del Carpio’s solid gold chamberpot (an important symbol also in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, where gold is unanimously despised and used only as material for this and other utensils of the lowest order), into which only Fernanda—born to be a queen—was permitted to defecate and which bears, incrustated on its bottom like the seal of the republic on the bottom of the dictator’s chamberpot in Miguel Angel Asturias’ *El señor Presidente*, the coat-of-arms of a respectable family of the highlands.<sup>5</sup>

Garcia Márquez loves the gold that emanates from light, as it is seen—he has said—on the surface of the Caribbean Sea on a clear day at three in the afternoon

or, we can assume, in the tiny yellow flowers that fell for hours in the form of a blizzard and served to celebrate the passing away and implicit resurrection of José Arcadio Buendía. But he dislikes the gold that constitutes the spoils of civil war, the gold that goes into upper-class chamberpots, and the gold that the dejected Colonel Aureliano Buendía, in the frustration of his forced retirement, shapes into small fishes day after day.

Fish symbolize progress; Juan Eduardo Cirlot refers us to “a solendi Scythian fish,” made of gold and which can be seen in the Museum of Berlin. “This golden fish, then, is a symbol of the progress of the world across the sea of ‘unformed’ realities (or of worlds dissolved or yet unformed, or of the primordial seas).”<sup>6</sup> The progress of the world across the sea of unformed realities. Is this the genesis of Macondo and—by extension—of the Latin American world? But what “progress” can there be in an unformed reality, or in a world dissolved or yet unformed? This dilemma of formlessness, this strange political centrifugalization, the persistent feeling that much of what has been done in the New World’s social evolution since the Conquest must be undone are certainly present in the lush materialization of Macondo: where self-indulgence vies against self-discipline, dissolution against purpose, and celebration against repression. The dilemma of formlessness is daily enacted in Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s workshop, where the promise of a lucrative production line has been reduced to a counter-productive cycle. Old Aureliano sells his fish for gold coins, which he melts down and turns back into fish. By the time it was suggested that he convert Fernanda del Carpio’s chamberpot into fishes, he had lost interest, because in addition to his disappointment with his capitalistic venture he was losing his memory, and to lose one’s memory is to fall into irretrievable solitude.

Solitude had invaded Macondo in all its forms: amnesia; the Biblical rains; a death process made visible by its slowness (for example: Ursula at 120 or 130 years of age shriveling to the size of a small monkey); the disintegration of love in indiscriminate procreation, and in the inevitable multiple incest for which the spiral shaped pig’s tail was a symbol of divine punishment; then the foreign exploiters; and finally the red ants and the hurricane.

García Márquez would have us believe, if you recall the end of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1982, that the remedy for this real and symbolic solitude of the New World (and most of the rest of the world). The remedy is Solidarity (a heroic concept in the context of Polish rebels, a dirty word in the context of Salvadoran rebels?). Solidarity, and the refusal to allow, in García Márquez’s words, “the colossal disaster” everywhere, which has now become “a simple scientific proposition.” And Utopia? Little by little Macondo evolved—or disintegrated—into counter-Utopia and finally was blown away. Celebration had given way to the red ants. The new “Utopia of life” of which the writer speaks in the final paragraph of his Stockholm speech had had, in the novel that made him famous, a kind of fragmentary, Dionysian pre-existence; his characters had tasted, at least, the milk of paradise before losing out to modern civilization. It was really more as a world citizen than as a writer that he asked, that day, for the “Utopia of life”: a place where love would be a certainty and happiness a possibility and where “nobody can decide for others how they’re going to die.”

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The rooster is popularly associated with bravery and aggressiveness, but its main significance is that of regeneration and resurrection. Sir James G. Frazer has observed that the cock is one of several representations of the corn-spirit throughout Europe. In Transylvania, he wrote in 1922, roosters were still sacrificed at harvest time and in the spring their feathers were mixed with seed-corn "taken from the very sheaf in which the bird had been bound. . . . Thus the corn-spirit, in the form of a cock, is killed at harvest, but rises to fresh life and activity in the spring" (*The Golden Bough*, abridged edition, New York: Macmillan, 1963, p. 524)

Juan Eduardo Cirlot (referring to Harold Bayley, *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, London, 1912, and "B.G.P.", *Diccionario universal de la mitología*, Barcelona, 1835) recalls the cock's significance as a sun symbol and as a cure for the sick (remember in this connection the chronic ailments of the protagonists and his wife in *Nobody Writes to the Colonel*). But more important is Cirlot's mention of the bird's Christian meaning: "During the Middle Ages it became a highly important Christian image, nearly always appearing on the highest weathervane on cathedral towers and domes and was regarded as an allegory of vigilance and resurrection. Davy [M.M. Davy, *Essai sur la symbolique romane*, Paris, 1955] comments that vigilance in this context must be taken in the sense of 'tending towards eternity and taking care to grant first place to things of the spirit, to be wakeful and to greet the Sun—Christ—even before it rises in the East.'" (*Dictionary of Symbols*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1962, p. 49)

- <sup>2</sup> *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (translated by Gregory Rabassa), New York: Avon Books, 1971, p. 214.
- <sup>3</sup> Aside from his dogges interpretation of Latin America as "Immature America," Hegel was able to foresee the growing cultural conflict between North America (which had been "colonized") and South America (which had been "conquered"). But for a brilliant critical summary of the great philosopher's generally myopic perception of the New World (in history as well as in nature), see Antonello Gerbi, *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo*, 1955 (translated into Spanish by Antonio Alatorre: *La disputa del Nuevo Mundo*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960, pp. 385-409)
- <sup>4</sup> *El olor de la guayaba*, Barcelona: Editorial Bruguera, 1982, pp. 30-31.
- <sup>5</sup> Norman C. Brown has provocative essays in *Life Against Death* on the interrelationship of gold, excrement and religion throughout Western cultural history. See especially the three chapters in Part V ("Studies in Analilty"), *Life Against Death*, New York: Random House, 1959, pp. 177-304. García Márquez seems to have been aware, if not of Brown's book itself (or the studies by Freud that influenced it), of that same tripartite relationship—gold, excrement, religion—in his portrayal of Fernanda and her masochistically pious family background.
- <sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 102

