

Latin American History in the Novels of Gabriel García Márquez

Tuomas Toivonen

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Introduction

I will discuss three of Gabriel García Márquez's novels, namely *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). The selection is arbitrary and based only on the fact that the three make up the set of García Márquez books I have read. Gerald Martin quotes Angel Rama in claiming that the works of García Márquez represent a unique achievement in the description of Latin American history and socio-political reality [Martin 1998, p. 189]. I can only claim to possess an outline-like awareness of the post-Independence history of Latin America, so my attempt to isolate facets of that history as they appear in the novels of García Márquez, will out of necessity be partial and, as is the case with my sources, arbitrary.

Polarity

The history Latin America society is one of polarisation. A history of the center versus the periphery; of the unequal distribution of power and capital: political, economic and cultural. A history of modernity embodied in the values of the Enlightenment and the idea of the republic, yet a history of laggard development and authoritarian politics. A confluence of cultures where the indigenous and the foreign are at once pulling the continent together and pushing it apart, both internally and externally in the context of the world at large.

When one writes only within one pole of an opposite a perfectly rational explanation of truth may be attempted. Within a pole the causal relations hold: the world is as it appears. Yet no polarity can be perfectly insular. Every so often an opposite intrudes

the domain of the other. The causal structure is broken, the reality shattered. This, I think, is the core of marvellous realism. The distance of the opposing realms great to such an extent that the presence of one in the realm of the other is akin to magic, or perhaps, akin to absurdity.

For García Márquez the polarities are trans-spatial and trans-temporal. There is a microcosm where either the external introduces the marvellous, or the internal dynamic of the microcosm doesn't accord with the world outside. Macondo is isolated. It is the periphery where the past can vanish in an epidemic of insomnia or in a cleansing four year rainstorm. Yet there is the center that intrudes with the wars of the liberals and the conservatives, the railroads, and the banana company. And there is an attempt at modernity: with the wandering gypsies of the old arrives the new of the magnet and the telescope. In Macondo the objects of science are held not only in wonderment, but the founding father of the village attempts to rationally incorporate the new. His scientific applications prove spectacular, in results as well as in uselessness.

The presidential palace provides the microcosm for the aging patriarch. What is reasonable within the palace grounds, is incomprehensible in the "nightmare realm" governed from the palace, and vice versa. The patriarch and his power are isolated. Activities of the patriarch never benefit the republic or its people. Neither are the people or representatives of foreign governments ever sincere in their dealings with the patriarch. The one overarching crime of the patriarch is to accept the illusion and with the illusion render everything meaningless.

In the love story of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza during the time of the cholera the polarity is not social, but between the spheres of human activity and nature in its undisturbed state [Franco 1994, p. 331]. For "fifty-three years, seven months and eleven days" Florentino's love for Fermina stays unchanged. When finally his love finds its fulfillment, it is a relic of a bygone era. While the human nature has remained intact, the environment has been eaten up, inadvertently, by modernisation. The luxury of the private has been at the cost of the public.

Loneliness, the central theme in the works of García Márquez, is also attributable to the articulation of the polarity. Loneliness because the polarities never truly meet. Loneliness because the characters are forced to live in one or the other pole, in a world they have not made, with values they did not consciously accept [Martin 1998, pp. 189-190].

A note on the Santa Marta massacre

In 1928 the Colombian Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) instigated a strike at the United Fruit Company plantation in Santa Marta, Colombia. The conservative government responded by deploying the army. In order to break the strike the army committed a massacre resulting in the death of tens, by some accounts up to two-three hundred, workers [Valtonen 2001, p. 358]. After some brief criticism of the government by the opposition liberals, the memory of the massacre was effectively erased — only to be raised by García Márquez some forty years after the event with the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 [Martin 1998, p. 190].

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the Santa Marta massacre is wrapped in surreality. José Arcadio Segundo — a member of the Buendía clan, the novel's central characters — is the only person left alive from the massacre. After he escapes from a train taking away the massacre victims and returns to Macondo, there is no-one that would believe his story of a massacre of thousands of workers. The government cover-up is complete.

In January 16, 1929 the US ambassador at Bogotá informed the US Department of State that “the Bogotá representative of the United Fruit Company told me yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military exceeded one thousand” [Wolf 2002]. Considering that contemporary sources appear to have been well aware of the scale of the massacre, it may be asked whether the surreality in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is actually the most appropriate device for describing the events — and not surreal after all.

Conclusions

I would have to agree with Angel Rama's claim in the relevance of García Márquez's novels in understanding the post-Independence history of Latin America. Personally I have found the novels “scaling up” well: the more García Márquez and the more history one reads, the more one gains from the one and the other. Conversely, reading García Márquez as pure literature, with no awareness of the historical context (as was the case when I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) will perhaps be of less interest.

References

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¹Available at <<http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/colombia/santamarta.htm>>.