
OBSERVATIONS

The “Magic” of Gabriel García Márquez

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“WHAT, THEN, is the American, this new man?” That is the question famously posed by Crèvecoeur in his 1782 classic, *Letters from an American Farmer*. He answered his own question: the new American, only recently an indigent European, understood that where his bread was, there was his homeland, and upon this foundation he would build a splendid edifice. Diligence, and the abundance it brought, would in turn instill a love of political freedom, as well as of the God Who saw to it that the righteous thrived. “Go thou and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious.”

Crèvecoeur believed it, millions have believed it since, and there is some real truth to it—provided, of course, that by “American,” one means, as Crèvecoeur did, *North American*, and specifically the United States. South of the border, it has always been another story. There,

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God has not beamed with such paternal tenderness upon the tillers of the soil. Mere subsistence comes hard; prosperity has been a dream too bitter to indulge; and the twin demons of oligarchic luxury and peasant penury have blackened any faith in justice, human or divine.

What, then, is the Latin American, this not so new man? And where does one look for him? Whatever the precise answer to the first question, many people around the world seem to agree that to see him most fully conceived, discerned, and embodied, one need look no further than the work of Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate who has long been resident in Mexico. The Spanish-speaking world itself holds García Márquez in deep reverence. A Spanish newspaper poll placed his most famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (U.S. edition 1970), third on the all-time list of world-historical books, after the Bible and *Don Quixote*. But his renown far exceeds the precincts of Spanish speakers. According to a recent article by the novelist Francisco Goldman in the *New York Times Maga-*

zine, García Márquez is “possibly the most famous and generally beloved literary writer *on earth*” (emphasis added).

Although none of García Márquez's other works has achieved quite the celebrity of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, many have been best-sellers and continue to enjoy a high reputation among both critics and readers. The most widely known are *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), and *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994). A large number of his earlier writings—he started publishing short stories in 1947, at the age of nineteen—have likewise been translated into English and remain in print. In the United States, García Márquez is probably as popular now as any serious native-grown novelist. His signature style of writing, known as magic realism, has similarly spread beyond Latin American borders, winning the flattery of imitation by such notable North Americans as Joyce Carol Oates in *Bellefleur*, John Updike in *The Witches of Eastwick*, and Louise Erdrich in her tales of Indian life.

Goldman points out, correctly, that García Márquez's fiction has altered the prevailing sense not only of the novel's possibilities but even of Latin American reality. Had García Márquez never written, Latin America would seem an entirely different place. For the legions of his North American readers, historically ignorant of nongringo reality, it might seem hardly to exist at all. Which once again prompts the question: what is the Latin America that emerges from his pages, and who is the Latin American? The answer is unsettling, on several counts.

AS IF to help us approach the question, García Márquez has now published the first volume of his memoirs, *Living to Tell the Tale*.^{*} With numerous digressions and excursions, the book takes him from his birth in 1928 up to early manhood in 1955; two more volumes are expected to complete the account.

On the very first page of this memoir, García Márquez evokes the fate of the immiserated multitudes of Latin America—a fate that, but for an inborn literary gift and some neat turns of luck, might have been his as well. It is 1950 and he is twenty-two years old, working as a journalist in the Colombian city of Barranquilla and frequenting the *Librería Mundo*, the World Bookshop. His mother has come to visit him from the remote town where the family lives, but at first he does not recognize her; the experience of bearing and nursing eleven children has marked her irrevocably, until, García Márquez writes, at the age of forty-five she has nothing left of youth.

But there is more to this particular anecdote. The mother has come to enlist her son's help in selling his grandparents' old house in the backwater town of Aracataca, where young "Gabito" had lived until the age of eight. Their two-day trip back home decides the course of his career: Aracataca will serve as the template for Macondo, the fictional

town that all the world will know as García Márquez's own, and where beauty of place serves only to accentuate nature's indifference to the human unfortunates who have mysteriously been set down there:

At dusk, above all in December, when the rains had ended and the air was like a diamond, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and its white peaks seemed to come right down to the banana plantations on the other side of the river. From there you could see the Arawak Indians moving in lines like ants along the cliffs of the Sierra, carrying sacks of ginger on their backs and chewing pellets of coca to make life bearable.

There is, indeed, much to make life unbearable in this landscape. The heat stuns you like a blow to the head, and scraping together a living can cost more than a life is worth. García Márquez has an eye for the terrible detail that bespeaks this all but unendurable severity. Passing through a fishing village, he notes the astonishing number of men with mutilated arms; it seems they fish with sticks of dynamite, and the explosives have a way of going off in their hands. A whole continent of casual horrors throbs in this matter-of-fact observation.

But if going about one's accustomed business can inevitably make one a casualty in Latin America, there is, for the miraculously fortunate few, the thrill of escaping the general ruck and fashioning an extraordinary life. García Márquez's is a success story that might seem to be very much in the North American mode—a story of pluck and nerve—yet all the more poignant for its singularity. In North America, the dreamy hopes stirred by the tales of Horatio Alger helped move persons of modest talents to pursue ordinary ambitions, thereby establishing a solid middle class. In most of Latin America, a man who made it on his own was heroic without becoming exemplary: then as now, there was

lordly wealth and mud-chewing poverty, and very little in between.

García Márquez's own means of escape, and the hallmark of this memoir, was his cult of male energy. In a land of hard unyielding life, he was bent on sucking every last pleasurable drop of juice from body and soul. That was to prove a messy undertaking.

By the age of twenty-two, he boasts here, he had contracted gonorrhea twice and was smoking sixty cigarettes a day of weed so foul it made his bones ache. Drink sustained him through much misery. He took a shine to the company of whores, and even when he was not paying for sexual pleasure, he paid in other ways. A half-century after the fact, the delights of the twenty-year-old Nigromanta, a cocoa beauty, still provoke a rhapsodic welling in García Márquez: "Her bed was joyful and her orgasms rocky and agonized, and she had an instinct for love that seemed to belong more to a turbulent river than to a human being." But then Nigromanta's husband catches García Márquez in bed with her, pulls out a revolver, and nudges him into a game of Russian roulette. The writer soils himself, and is unable to pull the trigger. When the gun proves to be empty, the "terrible humiliation" proceeds to plunge the young stud into long-term dependency.

If García Márquez's career as a Latin American macho ends in gross embarrassment, he is, at least, thoroughly uninhibited in sharing that embarrassment with his readers, who have to suffer through his zestful retelling of it. No less embarrassing, in the same sense, is García Márquez's relentless insistence on his measureless appetite for life—or rather *Life*, a word and a concept that he invokes with Zorba-like self-infatuation and constantly juxtaposes with its nemesis, Death. The latter, indeed, stalks the pages of this book: by story's end,

^{*} Knopf, 484 pp., \$26.95.

the young García Márquez has known men who met their end by decapitation, throat-slitting, and gut-shooting, and the corpses are stacked high like cordwood.

By far the most consequential death in García Márquez's young life was that of the politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a Liberal hero and savior gunned down on a street in Bogotá in 1948. As García Márquez tells it here, he immediately rushed to the scene to find "maddened hordes" setting the city ablaze. He himself indulged in a little sportive looting—snaring a handsome calf-skin briefcase in which he would carry his precious manuscripts—until a machine-gun barrage ripped into the mob advancing on the capital building and a mortally wounded man clutched at his trouser cuffs and begged him not to let him die. "Since then," he writes, "I have learned to forget horrors, my own and other people's, but I never forgot the hopelessness of those eyes in the brilliant glow of the fires." The civil war precipitated by Gaitán's assassination, he informs us, left 300,000 Colombians dead.

WAS IT the savagery of politics that made the literary life seem both impossibly remote to García Márquez and all the more alluring? For both him and his Latin American readers, at any rate, art has been above all a means of escape. As he was starting out, the local literary product did not provide much in the way of instruction or inspiration. He read his way through a whole shelf of Colombian novels, but years later could not remember a single one that made any impression. The novelist who really lived for him, who indicated what might be possible, was William Faulkner: the brahmin provincial who cleared his own path to glory, writing of a defeated land poor as dirt, thin in culture, but defiantly proud.

Though all of the novels on which García Márquez's reputation

rests were written after the close of the present volume of memoirs, the themes and experiences they encapsulate are all to be found here, and none more saliently than his Big Subject: the elemental collision between Life and Death.

This is certainly true of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a novel in which, as he notes, he "tried to plunder" his parents' memories of their courtship. What he ended up writing, however, was a book that came largely out of his own rapturous imagination—a sprawling, non-stop, fantastical meditation in which the terms of psychic combat are clear from the start. The message of *Love in the Time of Cholera* is that one must be determined to live—above all, to love—with fearless devotion to the very end, or else consign oneself to the ash-pits for those who have given up living before they are actually dead.

In the unnamed colonial city of this novel, whose action is set in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the presence of death is so intense that it threatens to overwhelm any resistance life or love might offer. Nevertheless, on the very night when Dr. Urbino—the resident expert on the containment of cholera—dies in a horribly ludicrous accident, a certain Florentino Ariz tells his widow, Fermina Daza, that he has loved her for more than a half-century, ever since they were teen-aged sweethearts pledged to marry. Not unexpectedly, she is enraged; but as she lies awake that night, she finds herself thinking more about Florentino than about her dead husband.

The novel recounts the spring-time passion of Florentino and Fermina: her blunt rejection of the poor youth; her marriage to the charming, urbane, wealthy doctor who does not love her and whom she does not love, but with whom she makes a conjugal life secure and tender though roiled by his adultery; Florentino's lifelong fidelity, which survives his obsessive tomcatting in

pursuit of a sweet oblivion he never achieves; and Florentino and Fermina's renewed love at an age when most people are letting go of life rather than grasping it more tightly than ever.

Along the way, García Márquez details the variousness of human love with a Proustian, encyclopedic zest, sacrificing psychological penetration in favor of a tumult of erotic incident. There is not a lot of deep thinking going on in this novel: go at life with everything you have, García Márquez instructs his readers again and again, or die before your time. Yet despite the raw sentimentalism of the teaching, the story is so rich with hopefulness as to make one's misgivings seem rather small; in all, this is García Márquez's finest novel.

IT IS NOT this one, however, but the earlier and much more problematic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on which rests not only García Márquez's worldwide fame but that of Macondo, the village mired in poverty, scorched by civil war, but bejeweled with magic. This novel, the saga of six generations of the Buendía family, cannot really be said to have a plot at all. One might call it a stationary picaresque—a congeries of erotic mischances, emotional grotesqueries, monumental ambitions, picturesque obsessions, flamboyant deaths, and supernatural visitations, all held together, insofar as it can be said to hold together, by the fateful consanguinity of the Buendías. These are the Latin American equivalents of Faulkner's Sartoris, Compsons, Sutpens, and Snopeses, rolled into a single lavish bundle of sages, madmen, religious zealots, fierce God-haters, money-grubbers, sublime disinterested artists, jolly roisterers, and icy killers, and incidentally embodying all noble striving and all vicious degradation. In writing this book, García Márquez set out to amaze as no one else before or since, and amazement itself—at the wonder of natural and

supernatural creation, and of human inventiveness—is one of the novel's principal themes.

What can one say of it? Readers everywhere adore this book; volumes of critical praise and loving exegesis are strewn like roses on its path through the groves of academe; yet few works of man enjoy such vast renown and deserve it so little. Rather than a compendium of life's uncountable riches, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the most smotheringly bookish of books, written by an author who has read all the wrong things and few of the right ones. In the end, García Márquez's imagination yields a bone-heap of political clichés, set amid a cavalcade of "marvels" whose power to astonish soon fizzles dismally on the page.

Take, for example, the military career of Colonel Aureliano Buendía, a veteran of 32 wars, each of which he started himself and each of which he lost. García Márquez's treatment of this character embodies every received idea about war and politics that has entered the liberal mind. Glory and honor, truth and right are—we learn—lethal chimeras that conceal the real reason why men fight and die, which is to gain power; tearing for years at each other's throats, men lay waste to their country and gain absolutely nothing; decades of obligatory inhumanity efface the only real life a good man ever has, which is to be found in family intimacy and tranquil work. And so forth: there is not a thought here that does not descend from Hemingway or Remarque or Céline or Graves or Sassoon or Ford Madox Ford or Virginia Woolf. Nor does García Márquez embody these hackneyed sentiments in vital or convincing action.

The same can be said of his canned indictment of the novel's vicious gringo banana imperialists and their native lackeys. The "banana bonanza" has transformed Macondo into a company town with a boot on its neck. When the workers rise up, the army turns its machine guns

on the assembled strikers and mows down 3,000 men, women, and children. José Arcadio Segundo Buendía, having been tossed wounded and unconscious into a railroad boxcar, finally makes his way back to Macondo, only to find that no one there knows anything about any massacre; to relatives who go looking for the disappeared victims, the army officers blandly declare, "Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town."

There might have been an actual massacre of striking plantation laborers in Aracataca in 1928, and then again there might not. In *Living to Tell the Tale*, García Márquez says he looked extensively into the question, only to "realize that the truth did not lie anywhere." Some—García Márquez calls them "conformists"—say there were no deaths at all, while others maintain that a hundred and more were killed and their bodies dumped into the sea. But a mere hundred dead are insufficient for García Márquez's purposes: he requires 3,000 "in order to preserve the epic proportions of the drama," which is to say, to bring refractory facts into line with his phantasmagoria of imperialist oppression. A man of lesser powers, and of less swollen ego, might have felt a qualm at the way his fiction supersedes the truth. But not García Márquez, who is the anointed master of Latin American reality.

And then there is García Márquez's celebrated magic realism. In the novel, when the banana potentates abandon Macondo under cover of darkness, it rains for four years, eleven months, and two days; this deluge evidently comes at the behest of one Mr. Brown, the head gringo, who is evidently as potent and as jealous as Jehovah. Other examples of magic realism in the novel are gypsies with magic lamps and flying carpets, flowers that rain from the sky to honor the dead, a child of incest born with a pig's tail.

If the intention is to disclose the miraculous that lurks in the ordinary, the effect is frequently to spin a kind of literary cotton candy, laying on the spectacular coloration with a thick and cloying brush.

IN HIS new memoir, García Márquez recalls reading *The Arabian Nights* in adolescence: "I even dared to think," he writes, "that the marvels recounted by Scheherazade really happened in the daily life of her time, and stopped happening because of the incredulity and realistic cowardice of subsequent generations." It is highly unlikely he ever believed such a thing; but he may have wished he could. As Sir Richard Burton, whose 19th-century translation of *The Arabian Nights* remains the gold standard, rhapsodized, "Every man at some term or turn of his life has longed for the supernatural powers and a glimpse of Wonderland."

Perhaps the most famous of these stories is that of Aladdin, the slumboy who acquires the magic lamp and along with it a genie who will grant his every wish. Only magic could effect such a transformation in Aladdin's fortune; no effort on his own part, however heroic, could have won him the hand of the Sultan's beautiful daughter and elevated him to a power in the land. This in short, is not Horatio Alger, rising in life by industry and brainpower; it is winning the cosmic lottery.

The magic here, exactly as in García Márquez, serves the pleasure of the terminally powerless, whose lives are subject to forces they can never hope to elude, much less to control. It is a fantasy that fulfills the same purpose as chewing coca leaves: it dulls the pain for a bit, while doing nothing to help anyone furnish a life of solidity or richness. Just so, although García Márquez purports to give a new epic resonance to the lives of the dispossessed and the overlooked, he succeeds only in perpetuating their most feckless dreams.

THIS MAY help to explain why García Márquez's ostentatious hatred for the cruelties of dictatorial misrule has never extended to the dictator who has outlasted virtually the entire Latin American competition. To the contrary, García Márquez is the most noteworthy friend that Fidel Castro has.

In *Living to Tell the Tale*, Castro appears in Bogotá on the night of Gaitán's murder, inciting the troops to revolutionary heroism, dazzling in his passion. García Márquez did not actually see Fidel in action there, but he has truckled to the Maximum Leader ever since the latter's ascent to power in 1959. Last spring, during an especially harsh crackdown on Cuban dissidents, the American leftist Susan Sontag assailed García Márquez for keeping silent; García Márquez responded with sanctimonious unctation that he could not count the number of Cuban dissidents he had helped, silently, to get out of prison or to emigrate over the past twenty years.

The riposte suggests that García Márquez is not entirely shameless. In response to it, though, the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa rightly covered him in scorn, calling him a "courtesan" who has acceded to virtually every abomination the Cuban dictator has committed—in return for which service, Castro has been known to offer up the occasional political prisoner.

If the future of Latin America is to be significantly different from its desolate past, one suspects it will have to take both its literary and its moral bearings from the likes of Vargas Llosa rather than from the likes of García Márquez. In a 1983 essay entitled "Freedom for the Free?," Vargas Llosa reproached the German novelist Guenter Grass for saying that the only hope for Latin America was to follow "the example of Cuba." Grass's foolish call, Vargas Llosa conceded, may have had an understandable origin in the "spectacle, that is almost inconceivable for a Western European, of the iniquitous inequalities that disfig-

ure our societies, the insensibility of our privileged classes, the exasperation one feels at seeing the slow death that the multitudes of the poor in our countries seem condemned to suffer and the savagery displayed by our military dictatorships." All the same, he insisted, only free men and democratic institutions could bring about the needed transformation.

Twenty-one years later, even as huge inequalities linger, democracy is the Latin American norm, and a decent future seems possible (if less so in Colombia than perhaps anywhere else). Small thanks for this are due to Gabriel García Márquez, who saw the terrible wound in the Latin American soul but could offer as a palliative only a shaman's incantations and socialist snake-oil. Should the Latin American ever prove a genuinely "new man," García Márquez's second-rate marvels will be seen for what they are: sideshow freaks to amaze gaping children, gaudy entertainments that dissolve at the touch of the real.

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