

## *One Hundred Years of Solitude II: Gabriel García Márquez on Disaster and Excess*

Magic realism has been criticized for its descent into cheap exoticism and even kitsch. See for instance British novelist Julian Barnes's tongue-in-cheek proposal that "a quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity of cheap life and expensive principles, of religion and banditry, of surprising honour and random cruelty" (*Flaubert's Parrot* 99). It is then perhaps surprising to find that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* ends so apocalyptically: with a mother bleeding to death, her newborn baby eaten by ants, and a hurricane of Biblical proportions that destroys Macondo and its entire fictional universe, all of which is to be "exiled from the memory of men" (417). There is little here in the way of consolation or hope. The tone is closer to (say) the "dirty realism" of Charles Bukowski, James Ellroy, or Cormac McCarthy, self-aware "of the loneliness, societal atomization and 'barbarism' evident in its milieu" and marked by the "'monadic' reality of containment, isolation and distantiation" (Tamas Dobozy, "In the Country of Contradiction" 49), than to the gentle amiability that we may expect of the ever-smiling García Márquez.

Of course, in some ways the book's concluding gesture is misleading: Macondo is in fact far from wiped out from its readers' memories. And despite the prediction that "everything written" in the manuscripts that describe and predict this holocaust—and so, by implication, everything that is written in the novel itself—"was unrepeatable from time immemorial and forever more" (417), there have been innumerable attempts to copy and adapt the magic realist style, with more and less success, from Salman Rushdie to Laura Esquivel and beyond. Indeed, if anything tends to be forgotten about García Márquez's novel, it is its devastating climax and the symbolic self-destruction of everything that has come before. This is the dark side of magical realism, its grotesque horror, that all too quickly fades from the reader's mind, or perhaps is simply not taken seriously enough in the first place. Within the novel, the various Buendías alternate between being open to and embracing everything that comes at them, or alternatively trying to shut themselves away from it. But in the end the book is on the side of life, of a proliferating but inhuman multitude that even the savage dénouement cannot overturn.

### 1. *Ruins as Destiny*

Macondo may finally be wiped out thanks to the cataclysmic whirlwind that ends the novel, but signs of its decline are by then already long apparent. The book announces that “It was the end” when Pilar Ternera dies: she is the last of the original characters, the last link to the town’s utopian foundation (“She had been part of the exodus that ended with the founding of Macondo” [28]). But people had been leaving and the town emptying out long before that. Even the birds that Amaranta Úrsula—José Arcadio Buendía’s great-great-granddaughter—introduces to repopulate the place soon fly away. Despite periodic attempts at renovation and restoration, the town, the Buendía house, and the Buendía family have all been slowly falling apart and decaying into ruin for years. Where did it all go wrong? Perhaps the turning point are the rains unleashed by Mr. Brown of the banana company: they last “four years, eleven months, and two days” (315), and by the time the skies finally clear we are told that “Macondo was in ruins. [. . .] The wooden houses, the cool terraces for breezy card-playing afternoons, seemed to have been blown away in an anticipation of the prophetic wind that years later would wipe Macondo off the face of the earth” (330-331). Or maybe the beginning of the end is the infamous massacre of striking banana workers and their families, shot down at the train station as they are “swirling around in a gigantic whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns” (306). Perhaps everything starts to go downhill even earlier, with the arrival of the railway, which brings the North Americans, first a Mr Herbert and then Mr Brown, and leads to the initial establishment of the banana industry. The railway is charged with ambiguity and ambivalence, as it brings “so many pleasant and unpleasant moments, so many changes, calamities, and feelings of nostalgia to Macondo” (222). It seems to herald modernization, progress, and development, but the boom that it prompts is passing and brief, soon replaced by death and destruction, misery and decline.

My question is whether all this is inevitable. Is Macondo doomed from the outset, as some of its inhabitants seem to think? More generally, what image of history does the book provide? Does history here have to mean deterioration and decay? Pause the video, and have a think about time and historicity in the novel, writing some ideas in your notebook. While you do that, I’ll have a shot of *aguardiente*, but I’ll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: *Aguardiente*

As everything in Macondo is falling apart in the novel's final pages, Aureliano deliriously staggers around the town, at a complete loss. After months feverishly closeted in with his aunt, he is out in the open again, and realizes how much he misses his friends "and how much he would have given to be with them at that moment" (413). He seeks out Pilar Ternera, the most long-lived of them all ("years before [. . .] she had reached one hundred forty-five years of age" [395]), apparently unaware that she, too, has passed on. He stumbles into a bar, "the last open salon of the tumble-down red-light district," where a bartender with a withered arm "invited Aureliano to have a bottle of cane liquor, and Aureliano then bought him one." They drink, and end up "weeping together and Aureliano felt for a moment that the worst was over" (413). Little does he know that worse still awaits him at home, where ants are devouring his child. It is fitting, then, that he is drinking *aguardiente*. Translated here as "cane liquor," in fact *aguardiente* can be made from almost anything—fruit, rice, potatoes, as well as sugar cane. Literally "fire water" (*agua + ardiente*), it is only one step up from moonshine, and sometimes not even that. It is the drink of the poor, of those who can afford nothing else, of those who drink simply to get drunk, of anyone *in extremis*.

The novel makes much of fate in all its various forms—providence, destiny, premonition, or misfortune. For the matriarch, Úrsula, the Buendía family is perennially living under a curse, and can at best only postpone the day when the child is born that has the tail of a pig. For Pilar Ternera, who divines the future through reading cards but whose life is also intimately intertwined with that of the Buendías (although she is never formally part of the family or resident in the family home, she gives birth to children with both Colonel Aureliano Buendía and José Arcadio), "a century of cards and experience had taught her that the history of the family was a machine with unavoidable repetitions, a turning wheel that would have gone on spilling into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle" (396). There is something inherent to the family dynamic, therefore, that leads to both repetition and decline.

Yet there are also hints that there might have been some way to trick fate, or to rid the family of its curse. Úrsula hardly resigns herself to destiny, however much she believes

in it, and even when she goes blind in her extreme old age, she finds ways to carry on and keep the rest of the family ignorant of her disability. Moreover, the same baby whose tail ultimately fulfills Úrsula's fearful premonition may also, it seems, have had the capacity to renew the family, "predisposed to begin the race again from the beginning and cleanse it of its pernicious vices and solitary calling, for he was the only one in a century who had been engendered with love." His mother, Amaranta Úrsula, suggests naming him Rodrigo, but his father refuses: "We'll call him Aureliano and he'll win thirty-two wars" (411-412). It is only then that the midwife turns him over and they see the infant's ill-fated appendage. Might this have been avoided if they had given the child a different name? Or if other children, earlier on, had similarly been "engendered with love"? The novel's final lines tell us that "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth" (417), but this too suggests that they had once had at least a first opportunity, even if they had blown it.



Figure 1: Train station in Gabriel García Márquez's birthplace of Aracataca, Colombia

## 2. *Open and Shut*

For the town of Macondo, there are dangers as much as opportunities in being open to the wider world. There is often a sense that the place was happiest when it was isolated and cut off, when it had few visitors. It is true that those visitors that do find their way

there—predominantly, the gypsies, with their extravagant novelties brought from the ends of the earth—infuse the place with vitality, encouraging creativity and invention also among the villagers themselves. They inspire José Arcadio Buendía and his children to dream extravagantly of what lies beyond the horizon. Yet heading elsewhere to seek fortune or fame seldom ends well: Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s far-flung military adventures are ultimately a futile waste of time; a generation or two later, there are high hopes when young José Arcadio (son of Aureliano Segundo) is sent to Rome, his family convinced that he will one day become Pope, but he lives in “misery and sordidness” in a shared Trastevere garret (368) until drawn back home in lieu of persisting with “the endless fable of his pontifical vocation” (367); his sister, Amaranta Úrsula, does rather better in her own sojourn abroad, but is forever possessed by an image of Macondo “idealized by nostalgia” (381), and ultimately returns to the town with her Belgian husband, never to leave again. But by then it is too late: once the town has found its place on the map, thanks to the telegraph and above all the railway, it soon enters its long terminal decline after the brief banana boom. No wonder so many characters look back fondly to how things once were, when “a trip to the capital was little less than impossible” (3) and nobody had yet died in the small settlement, closed in upon itself.

By contrast, for the Buendía house (and others) within Macondo, for much of the time it tends to be a sign of health when it is open rather than closed. Closure is a form of death in life, or “bare life” at best. Rebeca, José Arcadio’s wife, for instance, walls herself away: upon her husband’s death, she “closed the doors of her house and buried herself alive, covered with a thick crust of disdain that no earthly temptation was ever able to break” (133). Many years later, long forgotten by almost everyone, her body is found “on her solitary bed, curled up like a shrimp, with her head bald from ringworm and her finger in her mouth” (344). At times, other members of the Buendía family give in to a similar temptation to hide themselves away, and their house goes through extended periods with the doors and windows closed: Fernanda, Aureliano Segundo’s wife, has “the windows nailed shut with boards in the shape of a cross” in a collective penance imposed on all its inhabitants (346). These are almost always times of depression and decline. Periodically, however, someone will try to open the house up again. Amaranta Úrsula, for example, “being a happy, modern woman without prejudices, with her feet on the ground, opened doors and windows in order to drive away the ruin [. . .] and tried in vain to reawaken

the forgotten spirit of hospitality" (345-346). As the wheel that is the family history turns, there is a constant tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces.

One of the last times that the house opens up is when young José Arcadio invites the local children to come and play: "He would appear with them at siesta time and have them skip rope in the garden, sing on the porch, and do acrobatics on the furniture in the living room [. . .]. Until well into the night they could be heard chattering and singing and tap-dancing, so that the house resembled a boarding school where there was no discipline" (369-70). The kids turn José Arcadio himself into a plaything, much as many years earlier Amaranta Úrsula and "little Aureliano" had treated the matriarch, Úrsula, in her decrepitude "as a big, broken-down doll that they carried back and forth from one corner to another wrapped in colored cloth and with her face painted with soot and annatto" (327). With José Arcadio, the children "spend the morning shaving him, giving him massages with hot towels, cutting and polishing the nails on his hands and feet, and perfuming him with toilet water. [. . .] Then they would dry him, powder his body, and dress him" (370). It is as though order were finally being re-established, through play.

Then they stumble across the treasure that Úrsula had long ago buried, which she had hoped to safeguard until its true owners came to collect it. That conception of reciprocity and debt has vanished, and the fortune is now available for immediate expenditure. With the money, therefore, José Arcadio turns the house into a "decadent paradise," bringing in velvet curtains and packing the house with food and drink such that "the unused pantry was opened again for the storage of wines and liqueurs" (371); the swimming pool is filled with champagne. But the games get out of hand. On finding that the children have torn down the curtains and broken the bathroom mirror, José Arcadio "armed himself with an ecclesiastical cat-o'nine-tails that he kept in the bottom of his trunk along with a hair-shirt and other instruments of mortification and penance, and drove the children out of the house, howling like a madman" (372). Some time later, however, the expelled children return, break in through the bathroom roof, and drown their former benefactor. Previous attempts to get into the bathroom from above had been inspired by erotic desire or love (a stranger dropping in on José Arcadio's aunt, Remedios the Beauty; or the clandestine trysts of his sister, Meme, with her lover Mauricio Babilonia), though their outcomes had been equally fatal. Now it is juvenile revenge that leads to José

Arcadio's unceremonious end. What was once tragedy repeats as farce! Openness can no longer save the house, nor can closure protect it.

### 3. *Multiple and Singular*

Meanwhile, the novel's final claim that it is a somehow unrepeatable event is both an impossible paradox and a self-fulfilling prophecy. For *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is indeed a singular book, and its astonishing combination of enormous critical and commercial success has seldom if ever been duplicated: not by any other of the novelists of the Boom, nor even by García Márquez himself. But it is precisely its uniqueness that has ensured that it has never lacked for imitators. No wonder that Barnes or the writers later associated with the "McOndo" movement, protesting against "the sacred code of magic realism" (Fuguet and Gómez, "Presentación" 10), should plead for a stop to the proliferating repetitions of something like (but not enough like) *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose nadir was perhaps *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, by "self-proclaimed 'Márquez parasite'" Louis de Bernières (Kroin, "The Winds of War"). But more fundamentally, in that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is also largely a book about (indeed, obsessed with) repetition, it goes against the novel's own logic that it should end with such an absolute prohibition of duplication and reiteration. After all, it is the failure of such a prohibition—the injunction against the Buendía family's "original sin" of incest—that sets its plot moving and drives it forward, as the narrative is full of every variation of incestuous desire until finally the last of the line, Amaranta Úrsula and her nephew, come together and produce the foretold offspring with the tail of a pig. However much you try to do things differently and avoid the mistakes of the past, that past continues to haunt you. Indeed, *it is perhaps because ultimately Macondo is so full of the ghosts of the motley cast of characters that have wandered through the book's pages, that García Márquez can only put an end to it all by shouting "enough!" and bringing on a cataclysmic hurricane that tears the whole place down.*

For another irony is that this novel, whose title tells us it is concerned with solitude, does in fact, and thanks in part to its proliferating repetitions, present us with what can only be called a multitude. Even at its conclusion, when Aureliano is practically the only man left in town, the very objects that surround him invoke the continued presence of other lives that live on through shared habits. He sits in a rocking chair, for instance, that is "the same one in which Rebeca had sat during the early days of the house to give

embroidery lessons, and in which Amaranta had played Chinese checkers with Colonel Gerineldo Márquez, and in which Amaranta Úrsula had sewn the tiny clothing for the child." He feels oppressed under "the crushing weight of so much past" (414); this may well be a bad multitude. But the point is that his problem is hardly solitude per se, or at least not in any simple sense. More generally, this is a book that is characterized by excess and overindulgence more than anything else. Indeed, it would be no less misleading if it had the title *One Hundred Years of Plenitude*. Or as critic Roberto González Echevarría puts it, by the end "the text has reduced us, like Aureliano, to a ground zero, where death and birth are joined as correlative moments of an incommunicable plenitude" (*Myth and Archive* 28). It is so full that, like Jorge Luis Borges's "aleph" (and for González Echevarría, "Melquíades stands for Borges" [23]), which is "infinite things" in one small space and contains "the populous sea, [. . .] dawn and dusk, [. . .] the multitudes of the Americas" ("The Aleph" 283), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* threatens to make us mute and has to be destroyed for anyone to write more, to crawl out from under its shadow.

This is, after all, also a book that has ambition to be a "total novel"—another reason for it finally to declare that it can never be done again—and in service of that (itself, excessive) ambition, it overflows. It is not just one multitude, but many: a multitude of Aurelianos and José Arcadios, of butterflies and beauties, of inventions and apparatuses, of firing squads and wars, of gypsies and bananas, of candy animals and gold fish, of flowers and books, of chamber pots and doubloons, of merchants and mistresses, of (mis)interpretations and mistakes, of solitudes (yes, solitudes, too) and friendships. Everything is singular but nothing is single: another will always come along in time. If anything, Macondo's problem (and that of its inhabitants) is that it is never alone, that there is no way to avoid or prevent the manifold forces and energies that sweep through it. All these things with a life of their own, from the playful children to the ravenous red ants, overwhelm town, house, and family. Even closing doors and windows, shutting oneself away, is simply to embed oneself in the machine, often to invest still further in the formidable cycles of creation, production, and destruction that drive the multitude. The task, then, is less to resist the multitudes than to determine which are bad (pestilential or merely kitsch) and which are good, which lead to death and which enhance life in all its myriad incarnations.



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Song: "La casa en el aire" (Rafael Escalona)