

TROPICS OF TRAGEDY: THE CARIBBEAN IN
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ'S ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE

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One of the reasons often cited for the world-wide popularity of the so-called 'Boom' of Latin American literature in the 1960s was the supposed newly found maturity of Latin American writing, blending modernist formal virtuosity with an autochthonous, expressive language firmly centred on issues of Latin American cultural identity. Combined with exoticism — the provocative otherness of Latin America for non-Latin Americans — and with what John Barth described as a sense of exhaustion in Euro-North American fiction, the stage was set for a marketing assault on the international audience for prose fiction.¹ The popularity of the early novels of the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa and the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, three of the key figures in this literary-marketing phenomenon, was due in part to the sympathetic appreciation of their tales of Latin American national failure, especially when framed in terms of so-called Third-World nationalism and the initial successes of the Cuban Revolution. It is in this context that I wish to return to Gabriel García Márquez's magnum opus — One Hundred Years of Solitude — and the Colombian author's self-description as belonging to that shifting entity called the Caribbean, which oscillates between contrasting images of tropical abundance and sensuality versus the site of colonial exploitation and subsequent poverty within globalisation.

García Márquez, as a *costeño* (coastal Colombian) by birth and upbringing, lays claim to a Caribbean identity that seems as important to him (if not more so) as a national one. In his famous 1982 interview (El Olor de la guayaba [The Scent of Guava], henceforth El Olor) with the Colombian journalist, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, he was asked about the major influence on his literary writing and his cultural identity. His reply warrants quoting at length:

I believe the Caribbean showed me how to see reality in another way, to accept supernatural elements as something that forms part of our daily life. The Caribbean is a different world whose first work of magical literature is The Diary of Christopher Columbus, a book which tells of fabulous plants and mythological worlds. Yes, the history of the Caribbean is full of magic, a magic brought by the black slaves of Africa, but also by Swedish, Dutch and English pirates, who were capable of building an opera theatre in New Orleans and using diamonds as fillings for women's teeth. The human syntheses and contrasts in the Caribbean are not seen anywhere else in the world. I know all its islands: honey-coloured, green-eyed Mulatto women with golden head scarves; Chinese crossed with Indians who wash clothes and sell amulets; green Hindus who come out from their shops of ivory in order to shit in the middle of the street; hot and dusty towns whose houses are destroyed by cyclones; and on the other hand skyscrapers of solar glass and a sea of seven colours. Well, if I start to talk about the Caribbean you won't be able to stop me. It is not only the world that taught me how to write, but also the only region where I don't feel like a stranger. (55; my translation)

When it appeared in 1967, One Hundred Years of Solitude was lauded for the singularity of its achievement and its culmination of the genre of marvellous/magical realism. It nevertheless joined a familiar line of Caribbean narratives of failure in the quest for community framed within fatalistic and tragic structures. This failure is attributed to the apparent inability of the inhabitants of the fictional Macondo (Colombia? Latin America?) to develop a historical consciousness. It is this conclusion or 'message,' a claim made by literary critics especially, that I wish to challenge. The essay title — "Tropics of Tragedy" — gestures towards both the Caribbean and to the way it has often been troped. It begins with the Colombian writer's purported reasons for writing the novel and his own version of the way it should be read. It then proceeds to gloss the plot and its major symbolic readings,

¹ See John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion."

before sketching some of the major intertextual references that seem to frame the tragic structure, and how these intersect with and influence the ending of the novel.

When considering writers' evaluations of their own novels one should always adhere to the following dictum — approach with caution. Challenging their claims, of course, is a process fraught with danger, not least because writers are often hostile towards literary critics, especially when the latter purport to find ideological traces or influences unrecognised or unacknowledged by the writers themselves. García Márquez, along with Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes and other distinguished writers of the 'Boom,' have all expressed their distaste for literary critics in no uncertain terms. García Márquez describes them thus in El Olor: "they don't find in books what they can, only what they want. . . . [W]ith the investiture of pontiffs . . . they take on the responsibility of decoding all riddles in a book, running the risk of sayings stupid things" (75).² On occasion, the parallels between the themes of One Hundred Years of Solitude and García Márquez's stated intentions are readily discernible, but the Colombian author has also tried to impose authorial intention on the reading process with varying degrees of success. This is patently obvious in García Márquez's insistence that the key to reading One Hundred Years of Solitude is solitude versus solidarity:

Nobody has touched upon what really interested me in writing the book, that is, the idea that solitude is the opposite of solidarity; I believe it is the essence of the book. . . . [S]olitude considered as the negation of solidarity is an important political concept. Nobody has seen it. . . . Macondo's frustration comes from there. . . . It is the lack of love. (González Bermejo 27; my translation)

This interpretation has been taken at face value by Stephen Minta and Gerald Martin, for instance. One critic, Michael Bell, even saw fit to title his critical study: García Márquez: Solitude and Solidarity. No doubt the solitude versus solidarity theme can claim some warrant given that the novel was written in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, which still held out the promise of socialist redemption for Latin American from the ravages of neo-colonialism and right-wing dictatorship, and given García Márquez's well-known socialist proclivities. But One Hundred Years of Solitude bequeathed an ambivalent dividend vis-à-vis its vision of history. And this vision, I believe, is linked, in part, to its intertextual borrowings. Before we move to a discussion of these, I offer a brief gloss of the novel's plot and its major symbolic interpretations by other literary critics.

One Hundred Years of Solitude begins with a memory of a future past when Aureliano Buendía, in front of a firing squad, recalls the day he was taken by his father to get to know ice for the first time. The whole first chapter becomes a parenthetical description of the initial founding of a village in the middle of a remote tropical jungle. The chapter closes by returning to Aureliano's "prodigious experience" of seeing and touching ice for the first time. Not until halfway through the novel, however, does the initial narrative disclosure finally bridge the time lag, when we face the firing squad with Aureliano. This time narrative expectation is denied, as Aureliano avoids what we have been led to believe is the *fait accompli* of his execution. The reader is also aware by now that, although he is one of the central characters, Aureliano's story is but one instance of a much larger, collective tale of

² For daring to challenge the thesis on individual creation which underpins Vargas Llosa's critical work on García Márquez in Historia de un deicidio, Angel Rama was met with a withering attack. Rama's criticism, declares Vargas Llosa, was indicative of "the ideological blackmail of a new Inquisition that has arisen at the heart of the left" (54). For his part, in an interview for a short documentary film on his life and work (Crossing Borders: the Journey of Carlos Fuentes), Carlos Fuentes offered the following observation on his relation to the critics: "I eat my critics for breakfast, like little pieces of chicken."

the rise and fall of an idealistic community, dominated by several generations of a provincial, Creole aristocratic family. The novel's temporal loops and flashbacks, the foretelling of individual and collective fates, their frequent and often humorous postponement and the continuous blurring of fiction and reality, induce a narrative disorientation that mimics the life frustrations of the characters themselves. The narrative device of foretelling thus conveys on the level of structure the predestination that underpins the novel philosophically.

The opening chapter reveals a fictional world created by the most sophisticated of modernist literary techniques. Yet this initial fracturing of time, and the subsequent chain of narrative displacement, structures what is — excepting the challenging proliferation of characters with the same name — a relatively easily followed story. The novel is organised around the symbolic movement from Genesis to Eden and through to Apocalypse. It is divided loosely into three large thematic sections or narrative blocs: firstly, the utopian foundation of the town of Macondo; secondly, the town's consolidation, development, expansion and the onset of crisis; and lastly, its decline and destruction. The attentive reader familiar with Latin American history soon recognises certain locative cues that pertain specifically to Colombian national history and so the story of Macondo allegorically parallels the foundation, consolidation and eventual violent decline of the Colombian national state.³

Under the creative vision of its founder, José Arcadio, a self-sufficient agrarian society is established along egalitarian lines. José Arcadio's fascination with the inventions of travelling gypsies — magnifying glasses, compasses, magnets — awakens in him a thirst for knowledge and the desire for technological progress. He becomes the confidant of an enigmatic, world-weary gypsy, Melquíades, who attempts to educate him in the laws of the marvellous inventions and writes mysterious manuscripts.

Chapters four to sixteen are the part of the novel most obviously anchored in the consolidation of the Colombian nation-state in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. José Arcadio and Ursula (the Adam and Eve of Macondo) assume a dominant role early in the town's settlement, due to the social prestige afforded them by her inherited wealth and the fact that they are the only literate people in the community. But scientific advancement, accompanied by gradual control over nature, leads to social complexity. Soon Macondo is articulated into a more abstract project, the national state. Its size leads to a concern by the national government for the region's future political allegiance and, conversely, by the town's inhabitants for the attitude of the government toward them. The arrival of the government magistrate, Don Apolinaire Moscote, and with him the national military, marks a key transition in the town, the attempted imposition of centralised, national authority.

The community, now grown to the size of a small regional city, absorbs the successive impact of the first industrial revolution, including steam power and trains, and enters into a period of civil war toward the end of the century. An historic compromise, in effect an alliance, is eventually achieved between the Liberals and the Conservatives and formalised in the infamous Treaty of Neerlandia. This end to the cycle of war signals the onset of

³ There are two main references to real, historical events; the signing of Treaty of Neerlandia; and the infamous 1928 massacre of banana workers. The development and resolution of the banana worker conflict in the novel follows very closely the pattern of historical events, even down to the particular government decree - Decree Number 4 - and the military officer who signed it - General Carlos Cortés Vargas. Decree No. 4 actually refers to a 1905 law ceding to the military the right to intervene and judge as they saw fit in cases of national emergency. The law was established in the wake of the signing of the Treaty of Neerlandia. This is an interpretation shared by, among others, Lucila Mena and Stephen Minta.

modernisation: the opening up to foreign capital; the arrival of the second industrial revolution — electricity, telephone, radio, film; and, importantly, the banana boom. The town experiences an unprecedented period of fertility and abundance: “Macondo was swamped in a miraculous prosperity. The adobe houses of the founders had been replaced by brick buildings with wooden blinds and cement floors” (198).

Periodic forgetfulness, especially of the crucial events that shape the town, remains a structural constant throughout the novel, manifest in repetition and circularity: the recurring personality traits and names of the Buendía offspring; the seemingly endless civil wars (which all end in failure); the subsequent refuge of a defeated Aureliano in the empty ritual of making little gold fish, melting them down and remaking them; the cycles of frustration, lack of fulfilment and tragic death that curse the lineage. The novel seems to suggest that the inability to learn from one’s mistakes, the lack of historical consciousness (symbolised by the plague of forgetfulness), becomes the principal curse visited on Macondo’s history and thus a crucial factor in the events surrounding the massacre of the banana workers.⁴

The historical weight of war, political betrayal, economic depression, and successive moral failures on the part of its ruling elite — the Buendías — eventually leads to destruction. Melquíades’s manuscripts were finished after his second apparition early in the story, but they continue to be an enigma so long as Macondo still seemed to be in a phase of progressive development. But with the failure to resist the debilitating effects of civil war and the boom-bust cycles of modern capitalist industry, the town exhibits an increasingly desolate condition (symbolised by the ruinous state of the Buendía house itself) and the manuscripts loom much larger. They eventually find their appointed decoder in Aureliano Babilonia, whose name connotes the corrupt ancient city. The ultimate cosmic insult is that Melquíades’s manuscripts are deciphered only in the moment of final destruction, when it is too late. Even though the narrative displays considerable sympathy for its characters and their struggle towards redemption, García Márquez symbolically kills off a class parasitic upon the majority of the population, their “unholy” nature symbolised by the biblical curse visited on their successively in-breeding generations.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is a history witnessed and experienced from the ‘inside.’ By locating the narrative focalisation within the community of Macondo, García Márquez is able to avoid the declamatory style of earlier socialist realisms. He allows the Colombian bourgeoisie to reveal its decadence through its own actions. Rather than resort to the Freudian-modernist device of evoking fractured subjectivity through stream-of-consciousness narration and abrupt, cinematic-style time shifts (the time shifts are there, the difference is they are announced in oral story-telling mode), García Márquez’s way around classical realist mimesis is simply to situate his story-telling at the level of popular culture, focalising events through the consciousness of the townspeople, who through their selective memory re-animate the past. Moreover, instead of problematising the language of representation, his magical realism transforms the object of representation itself, allowing the magical and superstitious world of oral folk culture to ‘represent itself.’⁵ This magical-

⁴ This is the interpretation given by several well-known critics, including Angel Rama, Gene Bell-Villada, Gerald Martin and Stephen Minta.

⁵ The particular charm of magical realism is achieved by making the real seem magical and the magical banal. It turns on three moves: firstly, the most extraordinary and fantastic occurrences are embedded within daily routine and narrated in a casual, everyday manner - a psychological obsession with a guilt-ridden past is given concrete form in the presence of ghosts who communicate with the living and function alongside them in a matter-of-fact way; secondly, the author heightens description with Rabelaisian hyperbole - the strength of family blood-ties is literalised when the trickle of blood from the murdered José Arcadio defies gravity and the laws of motion as it inexorably crosses town, turning left and right,

realist technique combines with the novel's main themes, since by allowing the townspeople to reveal their own motivations or bewilderment at an unforeseen course of events, the reader is invited to observe the structure of fate which dominates Macondo. Such tragic structure was for a long time a constant throughout García Márquez's writings, finding its most 'classical' expression in the much earlier La Hojarasca (Leafstorm).⁶

One Hundred Years of Solitude makes use of many of the distinguishing characteristics of the Latin American modernist tradition, and their appearance in the novel calls for explanation beyond superficial acknowledgement as 'influences.' Interestingly, García Márquez's now famous interview with Apuleyo Mendoza - El Olor — is conspicuous for its failure to mention *any* of the Latin American modernists immediately prior to his generation. García Márquez cites his primary influences in "Lecturas e influencias" ("Readings and influences") (El Olor 49-55). His 'anxiety of influence' (Bloom) is significant. All of the 'Boom' authors have distanced themselves from their immediate Latin American precursors, content to eulogise the standard European and North American modernists — Joyce, Kafka, Woolf, Faulkner, Dos Passos, et al. Early in his journalistic career, García Márquez had praised the works of the European modernists and the North American Faulkner in particular and called for a renovation of Colombian fiction along modernist lines. But while one can reasonably speculate that there is a nod towards Proust in the recovery of the world of childhood in One Hundred Years of Solitude, one searches in vain for any direct influence by other European modernists such as Joyce or Woolf — interior monologue, dream sequences, linguistic experimentation — save for the general modernist technique of temporal dislocation. (Faulkner is absolutely central, of course, and we will turn to him shortly.) What one does find in One Hundred Years, however, is the desire to write a totalising narrative.⁷ But the all-encompassing and incorporative vision of Colombian and Latin American history — the 'total novel' — leads to the contradictory juxtaposition of disparate elements from other recognised Latin American intertexts.

carefully avoiding the rugs in Ursula's house, to arrive finally and remorselessly at her feet in the kitchen to announce her son's death (this sort of device for heightening a sense of the marvellous also suggests ambiguous readings: either a comment on exaggerated blood ties and Ursula's overly-dominant influence on the family, or the nineteenth-century naturalist belief in the palpable influence of genetic or racial inheritance in determining human behaviour. Such readings do not really impact on an analysis from the national point of view); thirdly, metaphor is 'concretised' - Remedios La Bella's ascension is based on a 'real' story invented by the parents of a young girl to cover-up the fact that she eloped with a travelling salesman; a five year biblical rain literally washes away Macondo's collective memory.

⁶ I have previously written about the relationship between Leafstorm and One Hundred years of Solitude in "From La Hojarasca to Cien años de soledad: Gabriel García Márquez's Labyrinth of Nostalgia."

⁷ García Márquez has never expressed the desire to write a total novel, but Vargas Llosa, for one, detects just such a project in One Hundred Years of Solitude:

One Hundred Years of Solitude is a 'total' novel in the line of those demented and ambitious creations that compete with real reality. . . . This totality manifests itself above all in the plural nature of the novel, which combines, simultaneously, antonymic things: tradition and modernity, localism and universality, imagination and realism. Another expression of this totality is its unlimited accessibility. . . . But One Hundred Years of Solitude is a total novel above all because of its utopian design as a supplanter of God: it describes a total reality and confronts that reality with an image which is its expression and its negation. . . . It is also a total novel because of its material, in that it describes a closed world, from birth to death. (Historia de un deicidio 479-80)

This failure to cite local influences is undoubtedly tied to the Boom novelists' perceived need to announce themselves as a new beginning, a break with an inauthentic past, visible in the statements of two of the Boom's most notorious self-promoters, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa.⁸ García Márquez has ably cannibalised the tradition: the matter-of-fact co-existence of ghosts and the living in Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo become Melquíades and Prudencio Aguilar; the Borgesian artifice of the narrator-decoder consumed by his own narrative in such stories as "The Circular Ruins", "Death and the Compass" and The Aleph is reworked as Aureliano Babilonia's decodification of the Melquíades manuscripts (indeed, one of the characters in El Aleph is also called Aureliano).⁹ But perhaps the most obvious borrowings are Caribbean, especially from the writings of the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias and the Cuban Alejo Carpentier. In both, a sense of the magical/'marvellous' is brought to bear on Latin American popular culture and in both a confrontation between tradition and modernity leads to tragic outcomes. In Asturias's Hombres de maíz (Men of Maize) (1949), we witness the functional presence of magic and myth in the daily lives of the Mayan Indians, as a rural, indigenous culture tries desperately to defend itself against the alienating effects of capitalist modernity. In the now famous prologue "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" to El Reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of this World) (1949), Carpentier expounds on the nature of the 'marvellous real' in Latin America, while distancing it from European 'surrealism.' Against the backdrop of the clash of modern technology and traditionalism, Caribbean popular culture contributes to a sense of magical or 'marvellous' realism, readily at hand in everyday life:

If we stop to take a look, what difference can there possibly be between Surrealism and the marvelous real? This is very easily explained. The term magical realism was coined around 1924 or 1925 by a German art critic named Franz Roh. What he called magical realism was simply painting where real forms are combined in a way that does not conform to daily reality. In fact, what Franz Roh calls magical realism is simply Expressionist painting. Now then if surrealism pursued the marvelous, one would have to say that it very rarely looked for it in reality. The marvelous real that I defend and that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace and always was commonplace. (102-104)

The past, never fully obliterated, thus remains present through the fragmented after-life of pre-Conquest civilisations, ex-slave populations and in auratic modes of cultural being, oral folk-legend and collectivist social structures. Magical realism, as practiced by García Márquez also refers to the 'ordinariness' of the supernatural. There seems little doubt that García Márquez, similarly rooted in Caribbean culture, was partly inspired by Alejo Carpentier's vision, though he has never admitted to direct influence. Carpentier's The

⁸ Carlos Fuentes writes: the "new Spanish American novel represents a new foundational language against the calcified prolongation of our false and feudal origin and its equally false and anachronistic language" (30). For his part, Vargas Llosa in "Primitives and Creators" only finds "primitives" before the arrival of the 'Boom' novelists. Though Vargas Llosa was referring mainly to the social realist and 'costumbrista' literature of the first half of the century, there is no doubt that he considered the 'Boom' generation to mark an authentic break and quantum leap in quality compared to what had gone before. José Donoso acknowledges the influence of homegrown precursors, but insists that the greater influence was from the North American and European modernists and the mutual influence the boom writers had on each other. He insists that he personally had read little of the so-called Spanish-American precursors of the Boom before reading the classics of European and US modernism.

⁹ See Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones 1935-44 and El Aleph. Emir Rodríguez Monegal has contributed an important essay on the similarities between Borges's narrative constructions and that of One Hundred Years of Solitude.

Kingdom pre-dates the 'Boom' novels as a narrative of national failure, since the novel ends pessimistically with a new black ruling class in Haiti replacing the colonial overlords. In Los Pasos perdidos (The Lost Steps) (1953), he narrates the story of a group of people fleeing modernity in order to set up a new society in the jungle. The project becomes a progressive journey back into 'primitivism.' In El Siglo de las luces (A Century of Light) (1962), he presents much the same scenario as El Reino, but now in a Cuban context. Similar thematics are evident in Miguel Angel Asturias, where Western rationalism founders in New World sensualism, magic and myth. Finally, in his Banana Trilogy – Viento fuerte (Strong Wind) (1950), El Papa verde (The Green Pope) (1954) and Los Ojos de los enterrados (The Eyes of the Interred) (1960) – Asturias pre-dates García Márquez's denunciation of the ravages of the United Fruit Company, and in Viento fuerte in particular, he make use of an apocalyptic wind, much like that which destroys Macondo.

No doubt all art borrows intertextually in this fashion. But one can still question the appropriateness of García Márquez's borrowings. It seems absurdly exaggerated, for example, to destroy apocalyptically a community and to banish it from history for its failure to realise its potential, national or otherwise. García Márquez borrows the fatalistic notion of history observable in Carpentier. According to the latter, idealistic societies inevitably fail, especially those that seek to break with modernity. David Mikics refers to Carpentier's "grim, implacable vision of history. For Carpentier, history offers a cycle of punishment, as repetitive and irresistible as nature itself" (384). Novels such as The Lost Steps suggest that "every 'new' beginning, conceals an obsessively self-conscious return to the past" (391). Accordingly, the failure in the quest for community in Latin America is due either to human nature – moral failure, corruption (a new black ruling class in Haiti), excessive pride (Aureliano Buendía) – or to physical Nature – apocalyptic winds or the relentless jungle, which consume all human endeavours. Nature, whether human or geographical, prevents the entry into history.¹⁰ Though García Márquez would most likely deny it, his (and Carpentier's) perspective links such novels as One Hundred Years of Solitude both to nineteenth-century naturalism and its biological determinism and to the early twentieth-century novels of the land such as José Eustasio Rivera's La Vorágine (The Vortex) (1924) and Rómulo Gallegos's Doña Bárbara (1929), where the stories conclude with Nature reasserting its will over the folly of human construction. But negative, biological-deterministic conclusions about the failure in the quest for community are predicated on measuring success from within a national framework and against the achievements of the North Atlantic nation-states whose unfolding was dependent, in large part, on the plundering of wealth in the non-West. Since the criteria for the success or failure of nations *as nations*, are predicated on North Atlantic developmentalist models of national success, all Latin American and Caribbean nations have inevitably failed to emulate their northern hemispherical models, which were built on the subservient, tributary status of the former. Expressed in these terms, continued failure indeed may seem 'natural.'

More important still are García Márquez's intertextual borrowings from Faulkner. Though García Márquez acknowledged Faulkner ("my master") in his 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech ("The Solitude of Latin America"), he never fully acknowledged the actual degree of the American's influence. In the same year, in his interview with Apuleyo Mendoza, he declared: "In the case of Faulkner, the analogies are more geographical than literary" (El Olor 50). This is simply not true. Much earlier, by 1950, a youthful García Márquez was

¹⁰ Tulio Halperín Donghi is a good interpretative guide in these matters. I am indebted to his analysis of the Boom authors for demonstrating exactly how the ambiguous attempt to define Latin American identity either with or against the geography - that is to say, either grounded in the landscape or as an attempt to free progress from the limitations of an overpowering Latin American Nature - leads to contradictions at a fundamental level. See especially pp. 150-55.

already reviewing Faulkner's work in his regular newspaper column and celebrating the North American as the "most extraordinary and vital creative artist in the modern world" (*Obra periodística* 490). Faulkner's influence is notably visible on the level of technique: shifting narrative viewpoint; the reappearance of characters in later novels; the stylistic device of foretelling an event that is henceforth framed in a tragic or pre-determined structure. Already in *Leafstorm*, García Márquez had built a story around multiple narrative perspectives, interior monologues and the device of a coffin as the pivotal centre of his tale, much as Faulkner had done in *As I Lay Dying*. Nor are the intertextual borrowings restricted to technique: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* unfolds against a background of plantation economies and a redundant aristocracy in decline, much as Faulkner's narratives do; Emily Grierson in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" reappears as García Márquez's Rebeca who, in the solitude of unrequited love, chooses a self-imposed exile in her own house; José Arcadio and his son Aureliano both seem indebted to Thomas Sutpen from Faulkner's *Absalom!* *Absalom!*, a larger than life, obsessive character who attempts to create a family dynasty in an Edenic, rural setting, whose family fortunes rise and fall and who silently returns from the Civil War, a broken man; the four-generation chronicle of the doomed Sartoris family, which includes such titles as *The Town* and *The Mansion*, prefigures the original title of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* — *La Casa* (*The House*).

With Faulkner, then, García Márquez finds an all too familiar reflection in coastal (Caribbean) Colombia of Faulkner's tragic chronicles of the ante-bellum American South in decline: poverty-stricken rural backwaters based on mono-cultural economies (cotton and bananas); an atmosphere of violence, heat and passion; the intertwined fortunes and confrontations of old established families and a transient population looking for work, determined to ride the temporary wave of prosperity. Faulkner's insistence on locating his fiction in the fictional yet familiar locale of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, a microcosm of the US South as a whole, also prefigures Macondo. In both, societies undergo a similar experience of the pathologies of modernity, but not its benefits. These stories tell of provincial societies left behind by the march of progress, of the demise of a whole region and its traditional way of life which, though based around exploitative labour practices and a social hierarchy privileging aristocratic families, provided a modicum of certainty and continuity in a world soon to be turned upside. And in both fictional societies, the linear advance of the outside, modern world is in stark counterpoint to the overall static and circular quality of these regional communities, unable to break out of repetitive cycles of failure, betrayal, frustration, violence and incest.

Like Faulkner, García Márquez broke with realism, but remained rooted in the regional particularities that provide a connecting thread throughout his fiction. Both writers display a historical imagination and a sense of the sweep of history, but also a tragic sense of the past. While the events portrayed in their work quite often pre-date personal experience, the memories were fresh enough in personal family histories or in the more general oral, folk culture of their respective regions. In Faulkner's view, the past coexists with the present and never more so than in societies seemingly outside history. This perspective also applies to individual characters in both novelists' work. A character is everything that has created him or her and the degree to which the past weighs heavily on them is in proportion to the degree of failure. But where Faulkner's novels evoke what he considered the tragic demise of the South, he did not present this as an allegory for an entire nation or a continent, as García Márquez attempts to do with his tale of Macondo. Cannibalising the more suggestive aspects of the modernist classics leads to overkill in the latter's representation of national failure. This community never really has a chance: it is assaulted variously by technology, nature, civil war, neo-colonialism, moral failure, and a biblical curse. How could it not fail? What can we conclude from this, if Macondo is meant to represent Colombia (or Latin America in general, the West since the Enlightenment, or all of creation, as Ricardo Gullón suggests)? Are we meant to sympathise with the Buendías (and there are sympathetic

sketches), or to condemn them for their failure to comprehend their history? The burden placed on them is surely too great for any community to bear.

The repetitive cycles of the failure of a static society, where the past continues to inhabit the present, further contribute to the overall fatalism of One Hundred Years of Solitude. There is a tragic consciousness at work here, as reminiscent of 'tragic realism' as of 'magical realism.' Though Aureliano is not a tragic figure in any strictly classical sense, since he does not know his fate, he withdraws from society after the defeat of his values and accepts historical oblivion. John Orr writes of the tragic realist novel: "the terms of the structure of feeling . . . are those of lost opportunities, broken dreams, necessary failure and betrayal. All constitute the failure of values to be authenticated" (52-3). Orr sees tragic realism as arising with critical social theory early in the nineteenth century, as the literary form of the "passionate political":

a vision of progress that contains an immanent critique, a sense of historical transformation which it then challenges through scepticism and disillusion or evolutionary exhortation . . . internalising a general ambivalence towards Progress. . . . [T]he analogue of tragic realism is in turn the unresolved conflict and class strife of modern history. (4)

As a form whose genesis lies in the decline of the European aristocracy (much as Lucien Goldmann theorised in The Hidden God), tragic realism in fiction can be traced in a direct line from Dostoevsky to the present day: "tragic realism reveals the flaws and failures in the quest for community" (Orr 5). It is difficult not to see in this a more or less accurate description of One Hundred Years of Solitude.

However, representations of periods of rapid transition vary according to whether the representer is imagined as winner or loser. A local instance of aggressive historical change is elevated by García Márquez into a myth, which then provides the template for an outline of national history. The writer's own personal history, dominated by solitude and loss, is projected onto the social history of a region, which then does double duty for national history. Personal memory is displaced into social history and textualised as fiction: for García Márquez, as for Aureliano Buendía, wealth and fashion have replaced the 'simple' virtues of thrift and hard work. The theme is worked up into a narrative of progressive social decay, symbolised by natural decay and the creation of a ruined landscape. The eventual solution to failure in the quest for community is to banish all and sundry beyond history in a biblical holocaust that engulfs both the guilty and the innocent; in so doing, blame tends to be levelled. Therefore, despite the fact that the local elite (the Buendías) and the banana workers are elevated to a position of authenticity in the novel, they too must regrettably disappear, overwhelmed by destiny.

Even though the literary recuperation of the massacre of the banana workers, which had been expunged from conventional Colombian national history, appears to contradict the patrician vision, both are nevertheless linked symbolically by a deep antipathy toward capitalist modernity, the ruthlessness of which destroys not only a purported pre-modern harmony, but also the lives of those most expendable in its inexorable progress. This romantic-conservative structure of feeling – the past against the present, the rural against the city, the communitarian against individualism, the established order against the newly ambitious — grounds the narrative ideologically. The aristocratic provincial order is destroyed by the outside influences of industry, national government and the proletarian masses, in short, by the penetration of capitalist social relations. The textual solution is the biblical hurricane. Thus, the historical eclipse of one class or group modulates into a metaphysical solitude, the human condition painted in tragic terms, much as Lucien Goldmann depicted in The Hidden God. In One Hundred Years, it is described as the death of the 'race': "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth" (422).

The ending of One Hundred Years is certainly apocalyptic, but is it pessimistic? Gerald Martin has proposed a strong reading according to which the apocalyptic denouement is best understood as a coming to historical self-awareness, influenced by the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, and thus a liberating moment in continental history. Can this view really be sustained by textual evidence or does it represent only a romanticised revolutionary longing for Latin American socio-political redemption? In his historical-materialist analysis of One Hundred Years, Martin clearly sets out to read the novel as an ideological parallel to the Cuban Revolution, both in its politics and its success, and to demystify some of the more standard interpretations. In particular, he is critical of the exaggerated focus on “myth-readings”, which he parodies as “misreadings”:

This novel is not about some undifferentiated fusing of ‘history-and-myth’, but about the myths of history and their demystification. García Márquez is undoubtedly attempting to reproduce a labyrinth in order to begin liberating it.¹¹ (223)

(Here the word ‘reproduce’ is symptomatic of Martin’s reading. The implication is that there is indeed a ‘labyrinth’ in need of liberation, that García Márquez’s fictional portrayal of the past is *grosso modo* accurate in its general contours, especially those relating to national failure). One Hundred Years, he argues, can thus be regarded as a “materialist deconstruction of Borges and all the other idealisms which precede him in Latin American thought” (223). Martin also challenges those criticisms of the novel which point to the ultimately pessimistic and fatalistic tone of its story line, leading him to declare that all talk of circularities and eternal returns becomes redundant (at least as ‘influences’: they are actually part of the work’s subject matter). This is why the most convincing interpretations of the novel’s apparent dualism have come from critics with a sociological approach. (223)

The implication here is that sociological analyses draw such conclusions inevitably, but this is not necessarily so, in spite of Martin quoting those approaches which confirm (or inspire) his own interpretation.¹² The Argentine historian, Tulio Halperin Donghi, applies a historical-sociological framework to One Hundred Years and other texts of the ‘Boom’ and draws much less enthusiastic conclusions.¹³ Let us stay with Martin for a moment, however, to see where his analysis leads.

Structurally and thematically, One Hundred Years is, for Martin, a clearly readable indictment of Colombian national history and of its domination by capitalist values:

¹¹ I agree with Martin on this point, though I demur from the conclusions he draws from it. Like Martin, Edwin Williamson believes the magical and the historical to be perfectly separable within the novel. Both the narrator and the reader look in upon the world of Macondo, but are not “taken in” by the magical-realist perspective on life like the characters themselves: the “novel is, then, predicated upon a dialectic that opposes the experiences of the world inside the fiction to that which lies outside it” (47).

¹² Martin cites essays by Angel Rama and Sergio Benvenuto found in P. S. Martinez, ed. Recopilación de textos sobre Gabriel García Márquez. See Rama’s “Un novelista de de la violencia Americana,” Benvenuto’s “Estética com historia,” and Agustín Cueva’s “Para una interpretación sociológica de Cien años de soledad.”

¹³ The ‘Boom’ novels provide an answer, on the technical level, to the tradition of naturalist and telluric narratives which link national failure to climate and race, much in the style of Sarmiento in Argentina, da Cunha in Brazil, the social realist novels spawned by the Mexican Revolution and the novels of the jungle by writers such as Rivera. The ‘Boom’ novels imitated these naturalist predecessors in terms of their biologism and racial determinism and, crucially, their pessimistic appraisal of the capacity of the popular classes to enter modernity. This is why tragic and existentialist portrayals of Latin American reality in the ‘Boom’ narratives continue to exhibit the same fatalism. (See Tulio Halperin Donghi in this regard.)

individualism, scientism, rationality, exchange. The novel presents a blending of fantasy and reality “perfectly fused, and, analytically, perfectly separable” (220). This is achieved, in part, by presenting reality as it is experienced by the characters, with all their fatalism, superstition and inability to make sound judgements: “They are blissfully unaware of historical reality. . . . This explains the exoticism for them of phenomena which to us are quite normal” (228). On the other hand, the narrator guides us through the novel, revealing the “real” social conditions of Macondo and its inevitable decline. Thematically, the arrival of the banana company and the subsequent exploitation and eventual massacre of the banana workers, followed by the biblical rain visited on the town by the company, turn the novel into a story of “proletarian struggle. . . the secret thread that can guide us out into the light at the end of the labyrinth” (229).

Martin regards the death of the matriarch, Ursula Iguarán, as synonymous with the “moment when history, and the consciousness of modernity, has finally broken through to Macondo” (228). He continues: “At this point, then, the Buendía line is doomed. I take this to mean that the end of neo-colonialism is on the horizon, remembering that the novel was written during the early years of the Cuban Revolution” (228).¹⁴ This speculative leap fails to convince. Nowhere does García Márquez himself ever articulate any such account of this novel, not even in the heady days of its initial acclaim, when he was readily forthcoming on his writing. While we may, as critics, attempt to excavate the ‘non-conscious’ dimensions of a text — that which the writer is unaware of expressing — it is surely dubious to apply readings based purely on enthusiasm or conjecture unsupported by textual evidence. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (“The Solitude of Latin America”) in 1982, García Márquez refers to a possible “second chance on earth,” which seems to imply reference to a social aggregate (the Colombian nation, or Latin America in general) much larger and less class-specific than a family dynasty. This suggests that the fate of Macondo is not just the aesthetic obliteration of a redundant, neo-colonial bourgeoisie (and it is certainly this on one level), but also a more heartfelt lament at the loss of what was, in its initial stages (the post-independence period), an ambiguous possibility. The reference to a ‘second chance’ is also surely a re-thinking of the writer’s overly pessimistic image of historical failure offered in *One Hundred Years*. Otherwise, it makes no sense to presage the redemption of a class supposedly responsible for national failure. Martin’s analysis takes no account of the tragic structure that frames Macondo’s trajectory. If the novel were no more than an account of the destruction of an inauthentic past, then the tragic structure would be inappropriate. García Márquez’s use of tragic structure for the representation of the demise of a social group need not necessarily imply a belief in such metaphysical categories, but merely a way of highlighting a group’s inability to see beyond their parochial and circumscribed world. But it does present another dimension of the text of which the critic should attempt to give an account. I think we can hold both interpretations simultaneously and without contradiction: the novel is the aesthetic destruction of an inauthentic past (in spite of the deep sympathy, based on personal memory, for the characters), but is also framed in a tragic structure, which provides a particular way of looking at the world and at history.

¹⁴ Vargas Llosa, on the other hand, in *Historia de un deicidio* sees Macondo’s entrance into history as occurring when Ursula finds a way out of the swamp and thus Macondo is connected to the outside world: “via this route arrives the first wave of immigrants who convert the agrarian-patriarchal community into a site of workshops and commerce. . . . The Macondonians become artisans and vendors” (499). Vargas Llosa’s claim is the more persuasive. Martin’s is restricted to what he perceives as ‘consciousness raising,’ perhaps influenced by Marx’s own claims about ‘pre-history’ before the entrance into socialism. But such claims are dependent upon a dubious and subjective distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ history.

Martin is at his most persuasive on the subject of magical realism and the need to de-fetishise its uncritical appropriation by conventional criticism.¹⁵ But he is less convincing in his thematic reading of the novel. He intends to develop a positive reading of One Hundred Years, so as to counteract its misunderstanding by those who see only a pessimistic and nihilistic ending in the novel's apocalyptic close. It is this crucial re-interpretation of the end that Martin highlights, when he reads it as an aesthetic representation of a coming to consciousness by Latin Americans of what he prejudicially terms their "fragmented, discontinuous, absurd" (224) history. This sort of view can only be maintained, however, if one reduces Latin American history either to the attempt to imitate the industrialised, North Atlantic nation-states, or to enter modernity on Euro-North-American terms, which is essentially the same thing. In spite of García Márquez's aesthetic denunciation of a false past, his (and Martin's) gaze is still essentially European — Macondo is condemned for not living up to European conceptions of modern community; and elitist — only the enlightened intellectual or artist can apprehend history.

Martin's analysis, and hence his criticism of myth readings of García Márquez's novel, hinges in large part on his reading of the closing scene, where Aureliano Buendía deciphers the last page of the parchments, which prophesy his death and the end of his family line:

How does a Latin American begin and end a story? How does the story of Latin America itself begin and end? Every schoolchild knows the answer. It begins with a discovery and conquest (1492, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue) and ends with a revolution (in this case 1959, when Castro said this land is thine). So it is with this novel, which is about a frustrating and frustrated history, beginning with revelations and ending with a revolution in consciousness — a dialectical transformation, a critical awareness of the self in history after a hundred years of self-absorption — even if what seem to be happening is a death and disaster. (221)

It is easy to slide from García Márquez's openly declared socialist sympathies to a reading of his novel in this optimistic vein. But those sympathies can just as easily suggest a much darker reading: that the Cuban Revolution was in such stark counterpoint to the continuing social and political turmoil of the Colombian experience that it led him to a devastating portrait of national failure. In this sense, Lucila Mena may be right to suggest that the novel's apocalyptic ending is an allegory for the explosion of virtual civil war immediately before and after the assassination in 1948 of the populist presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.¹⁶ It is surely significant that the 'critical awareness of the self in history' achieved by Aureliano Babilonia, is instantly cancelled by the total destruction of Macondo. To what avail is enlightenment, if it comes to nothing? There are no references in the novel to the Cuban Revolution, oblique or otherwise, and critics should be wary of extrapolation purely on the basis of temporal coincidence and on the writer's personal politics. But Martin insists, to the contrary, that once

some of the characters become able to interpret their own past, the author is able to end on an optimistic note. The apocalypse of the Buendías is not — how could it be? — the end of Latin America but the end of primitive neo-

¹⁵ Martin objects to 'magical realism' being used as a catch-all phrase to encompass any exoticist literature:

the same term is often used, consciously or unconsciously, as an ideological stratagem to collapse many different kinds of writing, and many different political perspectives, into one, usually escapist, concept. Like the Surrealist movement from which it ultimately derives, Magical Realism can in part be seen as an unconscious - irony of ironies! - conspiracy between critics eager to get away, in their imagination, to the colourful world of Latin America. (224)

¹⁶ See Lucila Inés Mena, La Función de la historia en Cien años de soledad.

colonialism, its conscious or unconscious collaborators, and an epoch of illusions. (223)

The historical record suggests something rather different. Neo-colonialism as conceived by Martin (foreign, capitalist domination and penetration of Latin American economies) has not abated, but accelerated. In fact, the Alliance for Progress, the US policy toward Latin America designed to arrest the influence of the Cuban Revolution, helped to consolidate it. Nor is this the end of an 'epoch of illusions': the consciousness-raising of a minority of leftist intellectuals, artists, and historians hardly represents a continental liberation from colonialist and neo-colonialist mentalities. In any case, the notion of an epochal break seems to ignore a sometimes nationalist, sometimes leftist, contestatory tradition going back at least to José Martí at the end of the nineteenth century and passing through the Peruvian Mariátegui and the Nicaraguan Sandino before reaching the Cuban Revolution (a tradition recognised by Martin himself). Even allowing for the brief and savagely crushed experiment in Allende's Chile and for the achievements of the Nicaraguan Revolution (again, against seemingly insurmountable forces of reaction), local collaboration with international market forces and the exploitation of the majority of Latin Americans by their respective national bourgeoisies, suggests an ongoing picture of 'business as usual.' Nor has the plight of the masses of marginalised poor and the disenfranchised indigenous populations been resolved.

Like García Márquez on occasions, Martin insists on reading particular histories in continental terms:

This is one more illustration of the truth that Latin American authors best achieve greatness not through a national, still less a cosmopolitan perspective, but from a continental standpoint: by conceiving themselves as Latin Americans. (234)

But the notion of 'Latin America,' beyond the general acknowledgement of a shared, violent imposition of Iberian, Catholic colonisation on the indigenous populations and a shared history of neo-colonialism after independence, is one of the emptiest of analytical categories, concealing much more than it reveals.¹⁷ It often belongs in the same rhetorical basket as those overworked and frankly useless metaphors of the 'labyrinth' and 'solitude' for 'Latin American' studies. And so too the claim as to the inability of peoples to develop a historical consciousness. Such a claim is problematic in at least two senses: firstly, it is implausible (*inverosímil*) that a whole people does not understand its problematic history, or at least a lot of it, certainly in Latin America and the Caribbean anyway (and these two areas certainly overlap at times). In these regions, histories of violence, poverty and exploitation have been imprinted on peoples' cultures, their memories and their bodies. Latin Americans know only too well their history of invasion, colonialism and subsequent neo-colonialism, the slave trade, and the fact that their societies have been constantly fractured by massive disparities of wealth and opportunity, of a radical elite/underclass divide (especially in Mesoamerican, Andean and Caribbean countries). They did not need the Cuban or Mexican Revolutions to tell them that — these were merely the combusive expression of that knowledge — the desire by many to act. In addition, historical consciousness, by definition, is *post factum* and since history never ends (unless, of course, our present course of ecological suicide continues) a people can never really know its 'destiny' (if indeed such a metaphysical concept has any useful meaning at all). This prompts the observation that there is something altogether preposterous and even patronizing in such claims of a rise to

¹⁷ Halperín Donghi has an insightful view on this obsession as well. While the framing of issues in continental terms was a recognition of the 'comunes fatalidades' inherited from Iberian imperialism, it was also a way to shift the focus away from national failure. He uses Sarmiento as an example: "Así, en Sarmiento el paso de la perspectiva argentina a la latinoamericana refleja su progresiva desesperanza en el futuro de su propio país" (159) ("Thus the move in Sarmiento from an Argentine perspective to a Latin American one, reflects his progressive disenchantment with the future of his own country").

historical consciousness in Latin America, which sounds more like the self-validating (and elitist) narrative of radicalised intellectuals and writers of the 1960s thematising their own political *prise de position*. Secondly, even if the claim of a triumphant rise to historical consciousness can be argued for *within* the fictional construct, this triumph – the moment Aureliano Buendía deciphers the prophetic manuscripts in which the destiny of Macondo and its inhabitants is fated — is immediately cancelled by the apocalyptic wind in which all are destroyed, both the guilty and the innocent — a pyrrhic victory if ever there was one.

What is the ‘tragic flaw’ (*hamartia*) in One Hundred Years that leads to tragic outcomes? Apparently a failure to develop historical consciousness. But the conclusion is too pat. It seems to take no cognisance of the fact that the national form cannot simply be imitated without taking into account unequal global power structures which underpin and have indeed produced modern (post-Enlightenment) nation-states as we know them, unequal power structures that have reduced so-called ‘developing’ countries to a merely tributary role, at least in economic terms and have infused them with the logic of the metropolis. We must therefore question the ultimate utility of so-called ‘magical realism’ as an adequate fictional genre for representing Latin American historical reality. The belief in supernatural phenomena among many Latin Americans is not in question here, merely certain magical realist uses of such beliefs by dis-enchanted writers to animate their literary accounts of history.

In his perceptive essay on José María Arguedas and his final novel, El Zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo (The Fox Above and the Fox Below), Alberto Moreiras points to Arguedas already bringing the genre of magical realism to its effective end by 1971. The completion of the novel was the signal for the Peruvian author to commit suicide, unable to reconcile the fragmented halves of his being and by extension those of Peru — half Quechua Indian, half mestizo. For Moreiras, echoing Franco Moretti’s appraisal of García Márquez’s novel, magical realism and One Hundred Years of Solitude, as instances of ‘transculturation’ (the synthesis of centre and periphery in a supposed felicitous combination), arise “in a complicity between ‘magic and empire’, whereby modern literature’s ‘rhetoric of innocence’ takes its strategy of denial and disavowal one step further, into the heart of the victim” (192). Arguedas refused this premature rationalist closure in his writing, reasserting the radical heterogeneity of aspects of Peruvian culture unamenable to modernisation, but the price was self-destruction. One Hundred Years of Solitude, on the other hand, inappropriately ‘sutures’ historical explanation. It seems to say: ‘we failed because our auratic modes of being militated against historical understanding’ – the latter understood as rational mastery of one’s destiny, ‘manifest’ or otherwise, the ultimate Eurocentric hubris. Perhaps the ‘really true’ pessimism, the Lacanian ‘Real’ of Latin American Boom literature, if you will, is the acknowledgement that the Latin American magical realist tradition does not reveal a better, more accurate understanding of Latin American historical reality, but rather masks a catastrophic imposition of Western European ‘empire’ that has infused the very fictional logic of much Latin American writing in its attempts to demonstrate, via fiction, why Latin Americans cannot ‘get it right’ with modernity and nation-state formation, the lack of which leads to an unsatisfactory and indeed false conclusion — the inability to develop a historical consciousness.¹⁸

¹⁸ The ‘Real’ is not ‘reality,’ but rather all that lies outside and inside the subject, but which is never directly accessible. The Lacanian Real is the traumatic kernel, masked by and lying behind the social structure, but which nevertheless impinges on subjectivity and its functioning. Confronting the Real is potentially destructive to the psyche. Following Lacan, Slavoj Žižek claimed that symbolisation, or representation, will always fall short of reality, which can never be wholly revealed ‘in itself.’ The aspects of reality that resist symbolisation take the form of a spectre, he argued, that is, an unsettling (ideological) closure. For Žižek, this is the “pre-ideological kernel” (21) of ideology: “*What the spectre*

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conceals is not reality but its 'primordially repressed', the irrepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded" (21).

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