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The Dark Side of Magical Realism: Science, Oppression, and Apocalypse in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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Abstract

Magic realism is a style of literary fiction and art. It paints a realistic view of the world while also adding magical elements, often blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. The critical perspective towards magical realism as a conflict between reality and abnormality stems from the Western reader's disassociation with mythology, a root of magical realism more easily understood by non-Western cultures. The present paper analyses the dark side of magical realism in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

Keywords: Dark Side, Magical Realism, Science, Oppression, Non-Western Cultures

1. Methodology

Magical realism has typically been described as an impulse to create a fictive world that can somehow compete with the "insatiable fount of creation" that is Latin America's actual history.' This concept of magical realism received perhaps its most influential endorsement in the Nobel Prize acceptance speech of Gabriel García Márquez. The famous Colombian novelist began this speech, suggestively enough, with an account of the "meticulous log" kept by Magellan's navigator, Antonia Pigafetta. In the course of this fateful exploration of the Southern American continent," the imaginative Florentine recorded such oddities as "a monstrosity of an animal with the head and ears of a mule, the body of a camel, the hooves of a deer, and the neigh of a horse" (207). In the course of his Nobel speech, García Márquez recorded many less imaginative but equally improbable facts-"in the past eleven years twenty million Latin American children have died before their second birthday. Nearly one hundred and twenty thousand have disappeared as a consequence of repression. ... A country created from all these Latin Americans in exile or enforced emigration would have a larger population than Norway" ("Solitude of Latin America" 208, 209)—on and on, as if he were trying to combat a plague of amnesia. In such a "disorderly reality," Garica Márquez explained, the 'poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, soldiers and scoundrels" of Colombia had been forced to respond to one of the saddest and most productive challenges in modern literature: "the want of conventional resources to make our life credible" (208-209). Fortunately, conventional resources were not everything. So, according to conventional wisdom, "magical realism" was born, offering the type of hope that García Márquez tried to provide, in that famous speech, when he said that the writer can somehow "bring light to this very chamber with his words" (208). Perhaps magical realism might allow the writer to create in his work a "minor utopia," like the one inhabited by Amaranta Ursula and the next to last Aureliano at the end of *One Hundred*

Years of Solitude, a fictive order that might somehow, like the birth of a child, affirm life in the face of the most brutal oppression. It was a novelistic act analogous to pulling a rabbit, or a child with the tail of a pig, out of a hat. It was magic. The present paper analyses the dark side of magical realism in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

2. Discussion

Needless to say, critics have been quick to make use of such a powerful precept. "Magical realism" has typically been seen as the redemption of fiction in the face of a reality that is still becoming progressively more disorderly. But some critics have noted that the term, as it has most often been used, has always lent itself to certain simplifications. Most important, it has sometimes served as "an ideological stratagem to collapse many different kinds of writing, and many different political perspectives, into one single, usually escapist, concept" (Martin 102). Still, the overall optimism needs further qualification. In fact, there is another side of magical realism," just as there is another side of magic. Not only can the conjuror make rabbits and flowers and crazed revolutionaries appear instantly, but he can also make them disappear, just as instantly. Although critics have not been quick to notice, García Márquez also sensed this darker side of magical realism. Unlike his master" William Faulkner thirtytwo years before, he could not "refuse to admit the end of mankind." Apocalypse, he was forced to admit, had become "for the first time in the history of humanity... simply a scientific possiblity" ("Solitude of Latin America" 211). By the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, apocalypse had become, perhaps for the first time in the history of the novel, just one more calamity on this planet of misfortune" (211). When apocalypse does occur, García Márquez suggested, it will be pervaded, like so many events toward the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with a strange air of eternal repetition. It will only be the logical conclusion of the progress already brought by "advanced" ideas. In the disorderly modern world, magical realism is not merely an expression of hope; it is also a "resource that can depict such a "scientific possiblity." That is, it can depict events strange enough, and oppressive enough, to make apocalypse appear not only credible but inevitable.

On the first page of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* such a strange event occurs, an event that will recur, over and over, like the ceaseless repetition of names and incest, solitude and nostalgia, madness and failed revolutions-that haunts the house of Buendia: the gypsies come to Macondo. For a long time, they will come every year, always "with an uproar of pipes and kettledrums," and always with new inventions, until the wars make such trips too dangerous, and the natives become too indifferent; but their first appearance is the most impressive, and the most ominous. They first appear in a distant past, "when the world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point" (11). Into this "primitive world" the gypsies bring an omen of the future, an invention of great wonder and potential: the magnet.

Melquiades, the "heavy gypsy with the untamed beard," calls this invention the eighth wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia." (11). He drags around, from house to house, so that everyone can see pots and pans fly through the air, nails and screws pull out of the woodwork, long lost objects reappear. Like any great missionary of progress, Melquiades is concerned with enlightening the natives, so he also provides an explanation: "Things have a life of their own. ... It's simply a matter of waking up their souls" (11).

But José Arcadio Buendia, the first citizen of Macondo, has an idea of his own. Prophet, patriarch, inventor, and murderer-José Arcadio is not a man to forsake progress. He is, in fact, the most enterprising man ever to be seen in the village" (18). His "unbridled imagination" often takes him, along with anyone he can convince to follow, "beyond the genius of nature, and even beyond miracles and magic," just as he once led a handful of men and women on an "absurd journey" in search of the sea, the journey that resulted in the founding of their inland village (31-32). Confronted with the marvelous magnet, José Arcadio feels that it is necessary to discover a useful application. Whereas Melquiades is content to mystify the natives, José Arcadio must look, with a wonder of his own, toward the future. He comes up with an idea that is portentious, just as his technological imagination will be fatal. Through a process no one else seems to understand, he calculates that it must be possible to use this marvelous invention to extract gold from the bowels of the earth" (12). A "brillant idea," to a man like José Arcadio, should translate into a well-deserved profit.? Even though Melquiades is honest and teils him that this idea will not work, José Arcadio begins to search for "gold enough and more to pave the floors of the house." He trades in "his mule and a pair of goats for the two magnetized ingots" and explores "every inch of the region"'; but he fails to find anything he con siders valuable. All he finds is "a suit of fifteenth-century armor which had all of its picces soldered together with rust and inside of which there was the hollow resonance of an enormous stone-filled gourd" (12). Searching for gold, José Arcadio finds the remains of Spanish imperialism.

The following March, when the gypsies next appear in Macondo, they bring a telescope and a magnifying glass, "the latest discovery of the Jews of Amsterdam." Once again, Melquiades provides an explanation-"Science has eliminated distance"--and, not surprisingly, he once again mystifies the natives (12). His theory of the elimination of distance, like his theory of magnetic souls, is a fusion of chicanery and "advanced" science--and it is just as prophetic as José Arcadio's accidental discovery of the suit of armor. Even though the natives, José Arcadio in particular, are unable to understand the principles of Melquiades' discoveries, they are all too willing to assume that it is because they are not "wordly" or "advanced" enough. Melquiades' perspective, unlike theirs, is "global"; he has circled the world many times; he seems to know "what there was on the other side of things" (15). Perhaps he even believes he is being honest when he tries to comfort them by promising that such a perspective will soon be available to everyone, through the wonders of science, with no disruption of domestic tranquility, without the inconvenience of travel: "In a short time, man will be able to see what is happening in any place of the world without leaving his own house" (12).

But Melquiades' "theoretical approach to science, just like José Arcadio's practical" approach, suffers from a fatal blindness. Both of them are willing to assume that science is essentially democratizing. They do not undersand that José Arcadio's misdirected discovery of the rusted armor, and its "calicified skeleton," has already brought to Macondo a vision of progress" that is both mystifying and applied—but not democratizing. Years later, after the prolonged senility and death of José Arcadio, after the innumerable deaths of Melquiades, Macondo will eventually see the outside world--which José Arcadio tried so hard to discover, which Melquiades leads them to believe he knows completely--and science will be responsible. But, by then, the chicanery of the gypsies will only be displaced by more sophisticated and more determined exploitation.

For the moment, however, José Arcadio is simply inspired by the magnifying glass, so he allows his fantasies to transport him, once again, closer to an "outside reality that he badly misunderstands. After watching another of the gypsies' demonstrations, in which the magnifying glass is used to set a pile of hay on fire, he immediately decides that this invention has even greater potential than the magnet because it can prove useful as an "instrument of war." Ignoring the protests of Melquiades, and ignoring the legitimate fears of his wife, José Arcadio is compelled, once again, to invest in an invention. This time, he uses a more progressive currency, the two magnetized ingots and three colonial coins." His enthusiasm prevents him from noticing that his currency is being debased. Many years later, gold, and even colonial coins, will be superseded by the banana company's scrip, which is "good only to buy Virginia ham in the company commisaries" (278); but José Arcadio will never be able to understand how the debasement of the currency 'helps support the domination of his people. He is happy to dream of progress, to experiment, to burn himself, to almost set the house on fire, and to finally complete "a manual of startling instructional clarity and an irresistable power of conviction" (13)-thus linking, for the first time in the history of Macondo, and without noticing, scientific discovery and political rhetoric.

Then, in his zeal to improve his village, José Arcadio makes the greatest of his many misjudgments: he sends his manual to the military authorities'' (13). With it, he sends all the scientific evidence he considers appropriate, "numerous descriptions of his experiments and several pages of explanatory sketches" (13). He is determined to leave no doubt that he is ready to do his part for the perfection of military technology: if called upon, he will even "train them himself in the complicated art of solar war" (13). Nothing happens. At least, nothing happens in Macondo. But it is clearly not José Arcadio's fault that the government fails to respond. He has even anticipated Star Wars.

José Arcadio never quite recovers from his disappointment at having been denied the excitement of futuristic wars. Melquiades tries to console him with more “new” discoveries: an astrolabe, a compass, a sextant, and the alchemical equipment that Colonel Aureliano Buendia will later use to make the little gold fishes that will ultimately, and ironically, become the symbol of failed subversion. José Arcadio does revive his spirits just long enough to prove that “The earth is round like an orange” (14). By this time, however, his dedication to science only convinces Ursula, and most everyone else, that he has lost what little was left of his mind. Later, when confronted with the marvel of ice, he will imagine an entire city constructed entirely of the fantastic substance; he will create a memory machine in an attempt to combat Macondo’s plague of somnambulistic insomnia; he will spend sleepless nights trying to apply the principle of the pendulum to oxcarts, to harrows, “to everything that was useful when put into motion”; he will even try to execute a daguerreotype of Godbut he will continue to lose faith in the reality of his fantasies. So his family must fight a losing battle, struggling to keep him from “being dragged by his imagination into a delirium from which he would not recover” (80). Finally, they all have to be content with his strange senility, interrupted only by prophecies in Latin..

The tragedy of José Arcadio Buendia, is that his infatuation with science allows the government to exploit a passion that was, initially, a “spirit of social initiative.” His first creations were the traps and cages he used to fill all the houses in the village with birds. He made sure that the houses were placed in such a way that from all of them one could reach the river and draw water with the same effort” (18); he saw that no house received more sun than another. He was, from the start, a type of “model citizen,” useful to his people. It is the appearance of “advanced” science in Macondo that makes him, virtually overnight, useful to authority: “That spirit of social initiative disappeared in a short time, pulled away by the fever of magnets, the astronomical calculations, the dreams of transmutation, and the urge to discover the wonders of the world” (18). That is how his faith in progress, and the faith of his people, is betrayed.

But more important than José Arcadio’s tragic disappointment, more important than his invested dubloons-which Melquiades returns in any case-even more important than his final senility, is the fact that he resolves his debate with the gypsy. Throughout the rest of the novel, scientific discoveries will continue to serve two purposes: science will mystify the citizens of Macondo and will lead to their exploitation. The novel’s arresting first sentence suggests that these two purposes have always been inseparable: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (11). But, perhaps, if his father had avoided such discoveries, Aureliano Buendia might never have wound up before a firing squad of his own government.

The equally arresting ending of the novel is a full-scale denial of José Arcadio’s ill-begotten dream. The novel’s “apocalyptic closure” is a denial of progress, as conceived by either the scientist or the politician, and a momentary glimpse of the world that might have been, if the great patriarch had not been so carried away with his idea of the future-if he had tried, instead, to understand history. Only Amaranta Ursula and Aureliano, the last adults in the line of the Buendias, see “the uncertainty of the future” with enough demystified clarity to forsake progress, “to turn their hearts toward the past’; only they are not exploited (375). Their child, Aureliano, is “the only one in a century who had been engendered with love”-but by then it is too late (378). They cannot enjoy their primal, “dominant obsessions” for long; they cannot remain “floating in an empty universe where the only everyday and eternal reality was love” (374).5 They are confronted, instead, with an end that is as ridiculous as their family’s beginning: “The first of the line is tied to a tree and the last is being eaten by the ants” (381). The world has not progressed one bit. In fact, the key to understanding the present, and all of history, is not in the science so valued by José Arcadio, but in Melquiades’ ancient manuscripts, written in Sanskrit. Macondo is finally devoured by the “prehistoric hunger” of the ants, then obliterated by “the wrath of the biblical hurricane” (383).

Because he is the man of technology, the man of science-as-progress, who brings together, more than anyone else, mystification and exploitation, José Arcadio is never able to forsee this end, just as he is never able to turn his obsessive nature toward love, just as he is never able to admit the kind of association that occurs to Colonel Aureliano Buendia when he faces the firing squad. He never understands, as Ursula does, that time is circular. He never really pays any attention to the suit of armor from the past, so he never learns that the rusted coat of armor anticipates the soldiers and machine guns that will support the banana company, that the imperialism of the past prefigures the imperialism of the future. In this sense, Ursula is capable of learning; José Arcadio is not. Ursula learns, at least, that her schemes for prosperity have set her up to be betrayed. Ultimately, José Arcadio cannot understand any of these things because his view of the world shares too much with the oppressors who will take over his village in the delirium of banana fever; in other words, whether he realizes it or not, his horizon is determined by the interests he serves. As John Incladon has written, José Arcadio's fascination with scientific inventions-as sources of wealth, power, control---"reveals a frantic desire to grasp and manage his world" (53).

The difference between José Arcadio and the other residents of Macondo-who think he is crazy, when they are not following him-is merely that he is a useful citizen of the active type, whereas they are useful citizens of the passive type. The only exceptions are Colonel Aureliano Buendia and his men, but their revolutions always take place outside of Macondo. José Arcadio is doomed because he has convinced himself that "Right across the river there are all kinds of magical instruments while we keep on living like donkeys" (17). His greatest fear is that he might die "without receiving the benefits of science" (21). The village is doomed by the same belief that magic-in particular, advanced technology-is valuable in itself, uplifting, and the privileged possession of the outside world. Once the people believe that science, like all uplifting things, must come from elsewhere, that the outside world is better because it is more advanced," then imperialism becomes much easier to justify. The gypsies' "discoveries" are always excessively foreign. Later, the residents of Macondo easily convince themselves of the innate superiority of Italian music and French sexual techniques. The Crespi brothers' business in mechanical toys, aided by their foreign looks and foreign manners, develops into a "hothouse of fantasy" (108).

If the government had only understood this inclination when they received José Arcadio's manual on solar war, they could have saved themselves a lot of time. But José Arcadio's plans did not convince them that Macondo was a regular hothouse of applied fantasy; in this sense, they did not fully appreciate their "natural resources until they learned from Mr. Brown and the banana company.

For their part, the villagers never understand what all these foreign wonders do to them. Like José Arcadio when he bumps into the suit of armor, they let their infatuation with the promises of the future render them incapable of uncovering their past: "Dazzled by so many and such marvelous inventions, the people of Macondo did not know where their amazement began" (211). They merely enjoy, with more moderation than José Arcadio, the excitement of closing the "technical gap" that has separated them from the "outside world.". The bearers of science are always exoticized. At the same time, the villagers' "primitive" past is rendered so insignificant that it is not worth remembering. To them, the important things have always happened somewhere else--and their future will be determined by somebody else.

Many years later, when the government massacres thousands of civilians in order to crush a union strike, no one except José Arcadio Segundo, great-grandson of the first José Arcadio, will even be capable of remembering "the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns'' (284). As for the rest, they will only remember what they have been taught to remember by the technocrats and by the government that supports them: "Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town" (287). In this "modern" world, things always happen somewhere else. The banana company, with the help of the government, is raising the village's standard of living, so it must be benevolent. It cannot be responsible for a massacre. The irony that José Arcadio Segundo has the narne of his great-grandfather is just one of the novel's, and history's, countless circles, one more indication that, despite their "progress"-or, in fact, because of their progress"--the oppressed have been unable to learn what is really important.

The first José Arcadio has a quality of many characters in García Márquez' fiction: he is so strange, so absurd, that it seems he must be real. José Arcadio Segundo is, in this sense, his precise opposite. He sees the events of the government massacre with a clarity that suggests he is unreal. So when government troops enter the room where he has given up hiding, they cannot see him, even though they are looking right at the place where he believes he is sitting. Opposition, to such a government, must be invisible. It makes no difference that they did not actually kill him, that he jumped off the train on which the corpses had been “piled up in the same way in which théy transported bunches of bananas” (284). He is merely left alone, once again, to decipher Melquiades’ ancient manuscripts.

In the end, however, José Arcadio Segundo shares something important with the first José Arcadio. “The events that would deal Macondo its fatal blow”-the strike, the public unrest, the massacre, and its aftermath--take shape at the precise moment that the train begins to control the events of the novel (272). Transportation, in Colombia, has inescapable links to the desire for “progress.” Auerliano Triste’s initial sketch of Macondo’s railroad “was a direct descendent of the plans with which José Arcadio Buendia had illustrated his project for solar warfare.” Aureliano Triste believed that the railroad was necessary “not only for the modernization of his business but to link the town with the rest of the world” (209). Only Ursula, who had seen so much of the suffering that results from such schemes, understood that time was going in a circle”; only she knew enough to fear modernization that came from the rest of the world” (209).

The train also allows Fernanda to travel back to the dismal, distant city of her birth. She has never stopped thinking of the villagers of Macondo as barbarians; and she is so intent on her desire to sequester her daughter in a convent, away from the “savagery” of the Caribbean zone, that she does not even see the shady, endless banana groves on both sides of the tracks,” or “the oxcarts on the dusty roads loaded down with bunches of bananas,” or “the skeleton of the Spanish galleon” (273). At this point it is clear that she has failed in her attempt to colonize Macondo with the manners and rituals of the inland cities; but her “internal colonialism” has been superseded, without her noticing it, by the brutal imperialism of the banana company. When Fernanda returns to Macondo, the train is protected by policemen with guns. Macondo’s “fatal blow” is underway. José Arcadio Segundo has already organized the workers in a strike against the banana company, and he has already been “pointed out as the agent of an international conspiracy against public order” (276). Fernanda’s two rides on the train are opposite in direction, but tell of a single effect: “civilization,” modernization, and progress are finally assured, even in Macondo--if not with proper” manners and gold chamberpots, then with guns.

The train is, if anything, even more symbolic of this progress” in Colombia than it is in Macondo. Under the dictatorship of General Rafael Reyes (1904-1909), “British capital was, for the first time, invested in Colombian railways in substantial amounts” (Safford 232). Not surprisingly, this period saw the completion of the railway between Bogota and the Magdalena River; “Macondo” was irreversably linked to the “outside world.” But, of course, that was only the start: “As the transportation improvements of 1904 to 1940 began to knit together a national market, significant innovations occurred in other economic sectors,” and 3” it was the nationalization of Colombia’s railways that made many such “innovations” possible (Safford 232-234). In the period of the strikes against the United Fruit Company, in particular, reorganization of the railroads was a central issue of American diplomacy in Colombia. The National City Bank and the First National Bank of Boston refused to extend short-term credits until a railroad bill was passed. By 1931, they demanded, in their negotiations with the Colombian government, an even greater control: “that the railroad system be taken out of the hands of the government and placed under the direction of professional management” (Randall 64). In his description of the banana strike, García Márquez makes the implications obvious: the same trains that send bananas and profits toward America transport the murdered bodies to the sea. There-both the government and the professional management” hope--they will disappear, even from history.

The repeated follies of José Arcadio--like the name and hereditary stubbornness of his great-grandson, like Ursula’s pronouncements, like the end of the novel--are attempts on the part of García Márquez to assert that history is, in some sense, circular. The “primitive” past of Latin America, like that of Macondo, might have provided countless omens of Colombia’s future, if anyone would have paid attention-that is, if anyone would have avoided the delirium of progress. From the first half of the nineteenth century, the combination of foreigners and trains was devastating, in Argentina, in Chile, in

Guateinala, in Mexico, and in Uruguay. With their public services, especially the railroads, controlled by foreigners, or by governments serving foreigners-first from Paraguay, then principally from Britain, then principally from the United States-these countries faced extraordinary military expenditures, “a frenzied increase in imports,” and growing debts, subject to inflationary manipulation. In Galleano’s words, they “mortgaged their futures in advance, moving away from economic freedom and political sovereignty” (216-219). Later, in Colombia, the tendency to see railroads as “forerunners of progress” would be just one more failure to remember. For García Márquez, such an assertion of history’s circularity is not merely a matter of philosophical speculation; it is a calculated attempt to make the outrages of oppression, ancient and recent, visible again; it is an attempt to make Colornbian history credible.

After the massacre, when the train from which he has escaped slips off into the night, “with its nocturnal and stealthy velocity, on its way to dump more than three thousand murdered bodies into the ocean, José Arcadio Segundo cannot see it in the darkness; the last things he sees are the dark shapes of the soldiers with their emplaced machine guns” (285).’ Perhaps José Arcadio Segundo carne to understand such progress as his great-grandfather could not, and perhaps that is why the government’s search squad could not see him. For men indoctrinated by such a government, opposition must not exist.

For such men the past must disappear. That is why they seem so improbable, and so real. That is why a “resource” like “magical realism” is needed to depict them. And that is why the novel’s famous “apocalyptic closure” is not only credible but also anticlimactic. Apocalypse is merely the darkest side of “magical realism,” in which the magic” and the “realism” are most completely fused, in which the most unimaginable event is the most inevitable. The “biblical hurricane” that “exile3” Macondo “from the memory of men” is “full of voices from the past, the murmurs of ancient geraniums, sighs of disenchantment that preceded the most tenacious nostalgia” (383). The ceaseless repetitions of the novel lead to this final conviction that apocalypse is only one more “scientific possibility,” which the primitive world” only understands after it is too late. Apocalypse is only the logical consequence of imperialist oppression, supported by science. The “events” that bring about the end of Macondo were actually determined much earlier, even before the trains came. The end began the first time the gypsies appeared with their foreign discoveries.

3. Conclusion

Thus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* presents the dark side of magical realism. Part of the effect of magic realism is created by the completely neutral tone of the narrator. He reports such things as gypsies on flying carpets, the insomnia plague, the ascension of Remedios the Beauty, and the levitation of Father Nicanor with no indication that these occurrences are the least bit out of the ordinary, just as the inhabitants of Macondo respond to the events. On the other hand, the residents of Macondo respond to items such as magnets and ice with great wonder, as if these were the stuff of fantasy.

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