Gabriel Garcia Marquez and His Approach to History in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

by Maria R. Estorino

Biography

In 1965, Gabriel Garcia Marquez recovered from his three-year bout of writer's block and practically locked himself up in the study of his Mexico City home. Eighteen months later, he emerged with a thirteen-hundred page manuscript and faced his ten thousand dollar debt. Soon, however, his financial troubles would be over, for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the manuscript he produced, went on to become an international success, eventually garnering the author a Nobel Prize in 1982. This work was not the beginning of Garcia Marquez's literary process, but rather a step in the author's career.

On the sixth of March in either 1927 or 1928, Gabriel Jose Garcia Marquez was born to Luisa Santiago Marquez and Gabriel Eligio Garcia in Aracataca, a small town just south of Santa Marta, the capital of the department of Magdalena in Colombia. Garcia Marquez's mother was the daughter of Tranquilina Iguaran and Colonel Nicolas Marquez, first cousins who had been in Aracataca since the end of the War of a Thousand Days in which Colonel Marquez fought under the Liberal general Rafael Uribe Uribe. These maternal grandparents had opposed the marriage of their daughter to Gabriel Garcia, but a temporary reconciliation had brought the daughter home to give birth to her first child.

Garcia Marquez was left in Aracataca to be brought up by his grandparents for the next eight years. His grandmother was a superstitious woman who would tell stories both amazing and common with equal conviction. Her storytelling style was an influence on Garcia Marquez, as he later stated, "It's possible to get away with anything as long as you make it believable. That is something my grandmother taught me." <1> His grandfather, who was a Liberal leader of the town, died when Marquez was eight years old, and as a result Marquez returned to his parents, who soon sent him away to school. He attended elementary school at the Jesuit Colegio San Jose in Barranquilla, ant from there he departed in 1940 to the Liceo National locate Zipaquira, a town thirty miles from the capital of Colombia, Bogota. With their somber, repressive, and colonial atmospheres, both cities were a dismal and gray shock to the thirteen-year-old.

In 1947, he matriculated at the National University of Bogota in an irresolute pursuit of a law degree. The previous year, Mariano Ospina Perez was put into power by a elite conservative faction, opening a violent phase in Colombian history. *La violencia*, as this time was known, "was an almost twenty-year period of rural violence in which over 200,000 people died at the hands of Liberal and Conservative guerilla bands, vigilantes, local authorities, and the army," and it was brought into full force by the *bogotazo*, which was a series of riots that followed the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan.

<2> In the midst of this turmoil, Garcia Marquez began his career as a journalist. As S. Minta states,

The apparently endless cycle [of *la violencia*] has been one of the central preoccupations in nearly all of Garcia Marquez' work to date . . . His concerns are . . . with the origins of violence, and with the effects that it has on the society in which people have to live. He is thus, inevitably, concerned with the whole history of his country and continent, and, both as a writer of novels and as a journalist, he has constantly laid stress on the importance of developing alternative sources of history as a challenge to the status of conventional ones. <3>

After abandoning his studies, Garcia Marquez' roamed the world from newspaper job to job. After several starving months in Paris, he completed *No One Writes to the Colonel* in January of 1957. While living in Venezuela, he witnessed the fall of General Marcos Perez Jimenez, dictator of Venezuela, in January of 1958 and, on March 27 of that same year he married Mercedes Barcha Pardo in Barranquilla. He stayed in Caracas until 1959, when he moved to Bogota to prepare the opening of a Colombian office of Prensa Latina, the new Cuban government's news agency. His first son, Rodrigo, was born during this time. In 1961, the family moved to New York City to work at the Prensa Latina office there, but after the tensions brought about by the Severance of ties between the United States and Cuba, they moved again, this time settling in Mexico City. There he tried writing screen- plays and worked for the Walter Thompson advertising agency. His second son, Gonzalo, was born in 1962. As mentioned earlier, he wrote in 1965 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which was originally published by Editorial Sudamericana in Argentina. Following the unexpected success of the novel, the Garcia Marquez family moved to Barcelona where the author wrote *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, published in 1975, and after which he moved back to Mexico City. In 1981, the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* appeared, and in 1982, Garcia Marquez was awarded the Nobel Prize. He was the first Colombian and the fourth Latin American at that time to be awarded the prize. This was followed by the publication of *Love in the Time of Cholera* in 1985 and *The General in His Labyrinth* in 1989.

Joined with his commitment to literature is Garcia Marquez' allegiance to social and political change. During his early education, Marquez was influenced by the information he received about Marx and socialist theory, and in his university years, he made the acquaintance of Camilo Torres, the rebel priest who became involved in revolutionary politics. Although he has no affiliation with any political party, Garcia Marquez claims to be a socialist. He does not profess a rigid ideology, but he believes in socialist revolution, especially as the best course of development for Latin America. From this he draws the significance of rooting culture and government in the people, but his experiences of violence have made him doubt the necessity of violent revolution to bring about equality and freedom for all. Garcia Marquez has commented that the region should not have outside systems imposed on it, neither western democracy nor the Soviet model of communism, but instead be left alone to evolve in its own way. His fiction and politics run parallel rather than intertwine, for while his works incorporate political statements,

none is an explicit proclamation of his views. His ultimate concern is the promotion of human rights and peaceful existence.

One Hundred Years of Solitude

By far, Garcia Marquez's most acclaimed work is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. As Regina Janes asserts, "his fellow novelists recognized in the novel a brilliant evocation of many of their own concerns: a 'total novel' that treated Latin America socially, historically, politically, mythically, and epically, that was at once accessible and intricate, lifelike and self-consciously, self-referentially fictive." <4> In it, the totality of Latin American society and history is expressed. Upon first reading, the novel appears to relate a regional history of the town of Macondo and the many generations of Buendias that inhabit it. This local chronicle, however, is representative of the history of Colombia and of Latin America in general, passing from the mythical pre-conquest time to that of history marked by "interminable civil wars, dictators, coups d'etat. brief resurgences of democratic rule, social revolutions promising much and betrayed by the makers of revolution or aborted by the prompt arrival of the U.S. Marines or of CIA funds to finance the counterrevolution." <5> The Spanish Conquest is represented by the fifteenth century Spanish copper locket and the shipwrecked galleon. Next comes a series of contacts with native Indians and black slaves, and soon begin the civil wars characteristic of post-independence Latin America. The Americans soon come in, representing the modern Western imperialism of the twentieth century. Some of the events which take place in the plot of the novel are drawn straight from actual happenings, such as the arrival of the banana company and the massacre of its workers.

Yet while the history of Latin America goes on, the history of Macondo and the Buendias takes place completely within the bounds of the novel, from birth to destruction. Gabriel Garcia Marquez has dealt with historical themes in several of his fictions, but in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the author makes a statement about history and the importance of historical consciousness. In this paper, the view of history expressed by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* will be the focus.

Circularity and Repetition

History is represented in two different ways in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: the way in which the characters experience it, and the method in which it actually develops. The characters are caught between the pressures of past and present, and from their perspective everything is repeating itself cyclically. "[They] see the past in general as part of the circular pattern of recurring events and in particular, as filled with negative personal experiences which they do everything possible to repress." <6> This presentation of time and history as repetitious is obvious to the reader, but she would be deceived to believe it is the way in which history really is progressing. Still, the cyclic structure of the novel is an important part of its historical analysis.

In her article entitled "*Cien Ados de Soledad*, Historia y Mito de lo Americano" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, History and Myth of the American"), Fanny Carrion de Fierro

asserts that the symbolic one hundred years of Macondo's time are divided into two historic periods which repeat themselves. <7> The novel begins with Macondo as a biblical paradise found by a party led by Jose Arcadio Buendia, the symbol of the patriarch in search of a utopia. The town begins simply with the only presence of the outside world being the magical gypsies who are led by Melquiades. However, the paradise is soon assailed by its first invasion, that of the insomnia plague.

Anne Marie Taylor contends that Marquez uses this as "an allegory to symbolize . . . the potential repercussions when collective means of communication do not function in relation to the past . . . [and it] prefigures the subsequent development of the idea that the inhabitants of Macondo cannot create a history." <8> The plague is notably brought to the town by the Indian servants of the Buendias, Cataure and Visitacion. They are the symbolic depiction of the whole Indian population of the Americas, a group forgotten and crushed by the conquering Spaniards who in the process "forget" their own past. Generally, the plague symbolizes loss of both political and social memories, loss of language, and loss of reality. <9> It threatens to make the inhabitants of Macondo forget everything, so they begin to label all objects and describe their purpose. They save their memory through the tool of writing, attempting to hold on to their awareness of their surroundings and consequently, the past.

As dangerous as this collective loss of memory and historical awareness, is the individual repression of the past as carried out by the characters of the novel. Most of them have acrimonious recollections and emotions, especially Colonel Aureliano Buendia, who brings the second invasion of paradise with his thirty-two civil wars. After the assassination of his sons, the Colonel "opened Melquiades' room looking for the traces of a past from before the war, and he found only rubble, trash, piles of waste accumulated over all the years of abandonment . . . and in the air that had been the purest and brightest in the house an unbearable smell of rotten memories floated." <10> The civil wars in which Colonel Buendia fights bring to Macondo political violence and consequently civil authority in the form of the *corregidor* Moscote. The first cycle ends with the marriage of the founding family's son, Aureliano, to the daughter of the first municipal administrator, Remedies Moscote.

Carrion de Fierro characterizes the second cycle of Macondo's history as a search for its utopia, its historical time. <11> It is marked by the increased communication and contact with the rest of the world, bringing civilization, the movie theater, electricity, running water, and the railroad, which facilitates the arrival of the banana company. All of these things produce the deceitful splendor of material copiousness. The arrival of a United States banana company leads to the collapse of Macondo and its residents. This destruction is climatically signaled by the massacre of the banana company workers.

The exploitation carried out by the banana company in Macondo is typical of the events of the early twentieth century in Latin America, when foreign investors practically took over the sugar cane, coffee, petroleum, and other major profit-producing industries of the region. Foreign investment in these industries creates boom conditions, leading to increased wages, and offers a seductive impression of progress and modernization. It

produces "new social conditions, suggests the possibility of something different, new and exciting." <12> So, too, in Macondo does the arrival of the banana company bring a new animation to the town with Saturday dances and the friendships that develop, particularly between the local and American children. Yet the company also stratifies Macondo's society, with the Americans living in their own enclosed quarters and not showing any interest in the development or modernization of Macondo.

Garcia Marquez's account of the banana workers massacre is drawn from the actual events that took place between Colombian government forces and strikers of the United Fruit Company in the Colombian town of Cienaga in 1928. Strikers had gathered in the square near the train station of that town, and when they refused to disperse, they were fired upon. After the event, a "conspiracy of silence" <13> was created around the actual facts of the incident, especially concerning the number dead. In his version of the story, Marquez remains generally true to the basic elements of the known facts while exaggerating the details and the actions of the banana company. Over three thousand die in the Macondo massacre, and the only surviving witnesses are Jose Arcadio Segundo and a small child. With the exception of his nephew, Aureliano Babilonia, no one believes Jose Arcadio Segundo's story of the massacre, including the families of the dead. As the only believer, Aureliano "becomes the central figure in showing the relationship between the massacre, its subsequent suppression from historical memory, and the decline of Macondo." <14>

Minta cites three issues with which Garcia Marquez is concerned in his depiction of the massacre. First is his obvious sympathy for the strikers and their position. The second concern is

his desire to rescue from a continuing conspiracy of silence an important event in the history of Colombia . . . [f]or once you fail to admit the existence of something important in your past, you are close to denying the past any significance at all; and, from then on, it is easy to deprive the present and the future of all significance too. <15>

According to S. Minta, Garcia Marquez is, in effect, saying, "what can anyone legitimately seek to know about the 'truth' of an historical event?" <16> Garcia Marquez' third concern is to question the reliability of historical accounts and records. The military leader against the strikers at Cienaga, Cortes Vargas, presents a version of the occurrences that differs from that of a strike leader, Alberto Castrillon; newspaper reports also vary from the investigations of Colombian lawyer Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. Marquez's version of the events, as Minta contends, serves as "a reminder that all versions of the past are incurably fictitious." <17>

After the massacre, the banana company brings a deluge upon the town which lasts for approximately five years, and during which time the town decomposes and regresses almost to its primitive state with vegetation and insects taking over everything. Soon after, Aureliano Babilonia consumates his incestuous affair with his aunt, Amaranta Ursula. While his son is being born with a pig's tail, fulfilling the incest curse of the family, Aureliano completes the deciphering of Melquiades's parchments only to find that

they relate the history of the Buendia family, that he is reading his own story, and when he concludes the unraveling of the manuscripts, Macondo is swept away by a giant wind.

The apparent circularity of events in these two cycles of Macondo's history is made evident through the gender characterizations of the Buendias and those associated with them. Most apparent is the repetition of the male Buendiast names and attributes. The Arcadios exemplify the force of sexual instinct, and through them the Buendia line will continue. The Aurelianos all have the power to foresee the future and die, unfortunately, without leaving descendants. The identities of the twins were confused in their youth so that Jose Arcadio Segundo is really Aureliano Segundo and vice versa, and this is the only place where the family history crosses itself. <18> Consequently, Jose Arcadio Segundo is the most socially conscious of all the Buendias as exemplified in his involvement in the banana company workers' strike. The women in general are more stable and discerning, paired into asexual-sexual pairs, <19> such as Ursula-Pilar Ternera and Fernanda-Petra Cotes, representing the wife-lover relationship.

While circularity is incorporated into the structure of the book, it mainly exists only from the viewpoint of the inhabitants of Macondo. Not only names but events seem to repeat themselves in the lives of the Buendias. When Jose Arcadio Segundo becomes involved in the banana company strike, Ursula "had the impression that once more she was living through the dangerous times when her son Aureliano carried the homeopathic pills of subversion in his pocket . . . 'Just like Aureliano,' Ursula exclaimed. 'It's as if the world were repeating itself.'" <20>

Yet the men and events were not iterations of each other, as Ursula and most of the other characters falsely believe, but simply parallels. "The repetitive cyclic pattern of the novel encloses characters, lives, that happen only once. However many parallels there may be, nothing happens in the same way twice." <21> The cycles of the novel do not result in repetition but rather in destruction. All of the events of the novel, instead of leading to a cyclic regeneration, lead to a final annihilation.

Linear Apocalypse

This is understood when one sees that while the characters experience life ahistorically and cyclically, time and history are moving in a declining linear motion. Lois Parkinson Zamora examines the apocalyptic setting of the novel. <22> By drawing correlations between biblical apocalypse and the rectilinear degeneration and destruction of Macondo, she denies the cyclic aspect of the narrative. Zamora sees early Macondo as a place where past, present, and future are unified, guided by the prophetic vision of Jose Arcadia Buendia. But with the intrusions that soon beset the town, the eschatology shifts from prophetic to apocalyptic (as in Hebrew history). The characters are bound to their past yet do nothing more than long for the future, causing them to lose awareness of their own history and place in it. They look to the future to bring them relief from the burden of the past, yet time will only bring them further deterioration and eventual ruin.

Zamora maintains that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is "also about the deciphering of the manuscript that records and preserves their history." <23> Because the story rests on the memory of the narrator and Melquiades in his manuscript, we call into question the nature of historical truth, how we create the past with our own words. Like John in Revelation, the narrator "uses the explanatory structures of apocalypse to give comprehensible--and comprehensive--shape to the history they survey." <24> Aureliano and Melquiades (whom Zamora falsely identifies as the narrator of the novel) have a different vantage point from the other characters in that they are able to see the Buendia history as a whole. They see the events that take place in Macondo as negatively predetermined. Despite its biblical correspondence, however, there is a major difference between the apocalypse of the Bible and the ending of this story, because for Macondo, there is no rebirth that follows the destruction. As the novel itself asserts, "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth." <25>

Zamora states that, "the novelists choice of such an ending is important because the paradigms of apocalypse impose an ending that confers historical significance . . . [it] looks back to record the history of an entire world, not simply to carve out a slice of that history from the flow of time." <26> After the annihilation of Macondo, what remains is the description, the narrative. While the situation itself cannot be salvaged, it can be preserved by the written word that attempts to record it.

Conclusion

One Hundred Years of Solitude clearly contains elements of both cyclic and linear history. But it is not enough to say that it is one or the other. Gabriel Garcia Marquez is presenting a view of history that consolidates both views. The characters' outlook on the world is cyclical and repetitious, yet the author and the reader can perceive the declining linearity of the realm the figures occupy. It can be envisioned as a series of cycles moving in a linear fashion that is leading to degradation and annihilation rather than progress and improvement. None of the Buendias are aware of the disintegration that they are participating in except for Aureliano, who, with the decipherment of Melquiades's manuscripts, manages to place it all into a historical context. And the characters' failure to create a history or a historical awareness is ultimately tied to the destruction of Macondo.

Garcia Marquez makes a statement about the importance of historical cognition. As Anne Marie Taylor so clearly states, "While . . . the novel clearly affirms the idea that a consciousness of history is a necessary precondition for a society's survival and autonomous development, there is no indication that this process is inevitable." <27> The characters carry out their daily lives in a world that is not as they believe it to be, while outside structures of which they are not cognizant determine their future. Is Garcia Marquez suggesting that if the inhabitants of Macondo had been aware of their history and their place in it, their end might have been different? That question cannot be answered here, but it is important to recognize that Marquez has given us a linear, declining, deceptively cyclic history. And within this arrangement, we must explore the

significance of historical consciousness on the part of the persons living the events and the role that it may take in shaping that history.

Notes

1 Stephen Minta, Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Writer of Colombia (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987) 37.

2 Regina Janes, *Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Revolutions in Wonderland* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1981)13.

3 Minta, 30.

4 Janes, 7.

5 Ibid, 3.

6 Anne Marie Taylor, "Cien Anos de Soledad: History and the Novel," *Latin American Perspectives* 11.3 (1975): 100.

7 Fanny Carrion de Fierro, "Cien Anos de Soledad, Historia y Mito de lo Americano," *Lectura de Garcia Marquez* (Doce Estudios), ed. Manuel Corrales Pascual (Quito: Centro de Publicaciones de la Pontifica Universidad Catolica de Ecuador, 1975) 185.

8 Taylor, 104.

9 Janes, 56.

10 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Avon Books, 1970) 227.

11 Carrion de Fierro, 187.

12 Minta, 164.

13 Ibid, 169.

14 Taylor, 107.

15 Minta, 170.

16 Ibid, 171.

17 Ibid, 172

18 Carrion de Fierro, 189.

19 Janes, 53.

20 Marquez, 276.

21 Janes, 65.

22 Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin Americana Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 25-51.

23 Zamora, 32.

24 Ibid, 35.

25 Marquez, 383.

26 Zamora, 44.

27 Taylor, 110.

Return to the 1994-5 Table of Contents