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Suzanne Jill Levine

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A SECOND GLANCE AT THE SPOKEN MIRROR: Gabriel García Márquez and Virginia Woolf

Suzanne Jill Levine

University of Washington, Seattle

Recently I took a second glance at *El espejo hablado* (The Spoken Mirror), a book I wrote several years ago which focused on the dialogue between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and a heterogeneous series of literary texts, among them the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.¹ Upon taking this second glance, metaphorically speaking, since a first glance would have already been a re-reading of my reading of *One Hundred Years*, I reconsidered the "spoken mirror" within Garcia Marquez's novel from which I borrowed my title. On the very last page of *One Hundred Years* Aureliano discovers the gypsy magician Melquíades' manuscript, the work that foretells *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and thus he calls it a spoken mirror in which he can see, read his own life at the very moment he is living it. Inevitably I began to re-read or re-write my own reading/living of *One Hundred Years*, becoming aware of the reader's presence. The reader was now not only emblemized by the spoken mirror in the original, in the novel, but also in one of its infinite translations, my reading. This second reading was inevitably more self-critical - of «blindness» as well as of «insight» -, for example, of my approach to García Márquez's portrayal of women which, though more affirmative than Juan Rulfo's view of women in *Pedro Páramo*, with which I compared it, is irredeemably traditional. I didn't criticize this tradition then but rather focused predictably on his positive view of women as strong and intuitive, his celebration of the Earth Mother, of the Eternal Feminine. I also underscored García Márquez's own declaration that the narrative «voice» which shapes the novel subsumes the voice of his grandmother, whose vision of the real as magical and the magical as real could be considered the «matrix» out of which this book was born.

This re-reading also revealed (anachronistically) omissions: for example, if I had attempted this study in intertextuality now, I would have certainly included a chapter on the Mexican Elena Garro's mythic saga *Recuerdos del porvenir* (translated as *Recollections of Things to Come*, 1964), published in 1963, which I have read through the screen of *One Hundred Years*. In its treatment of incest, circular time and the magical, not to mention innumerable coincidences of plot, characters and imagery, the mirror symbol, the stranger-magician who passes through town, the woman Isabel watching it rain incessantly, *Recuerdos del porvenir* is doubtlessly another palimpsest, paving the way for the epic of Macondo, a utopia no place but in Literature.

But what most attracted my attention at this reading was the discussion of the undeniable affinities between *One Hundred Years* and Virginia Woolf's «mother-text» *Orlando* - mother-text quite literally because it was written in 1927, the same year García Márquez was born, a magical coincidence I didn't stress then.

The judge who defended Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1933 from censorship in the United States, once observed: «Ulysses» is not an easy book to read or to understand. But there has been much written about it, and in order properly to approach the consideration of it, it is advisable to read a number of other books which have now become its satellites.»² Borges went even further than this heroic judge - who was also a literary critic in his spare time - by suggesting that it was better to skip *Ulysses* and go straight to its authoritative gloss, Stuart Gilbert's *Ulysses*, for elucidation.³ Extreme measures, perhaps, but I will suggest that we expand on the judge's concept of satellites, to mean not only books about a book but all of literature that speaks through any writer, and which can therefore be considered the context of any text or, to be traditional, the matrix of any creation.

In the context of García Márquez's life, or biography, *One Hundred Years* was first conceived by the author (in the 50s) as a «fictional biography» of his imaginary revolutionary hero, Aureliano Buendía. He wanted to tell the story of the most important person in his life, as he has said: his grandfather, whose tales had awakened in the little boy an awareness of life, or perhaps more accurately, an awareness of the marvelous real. García Márquez went on to portray both his grandfather's personal disillusionment, and on a universal plane the tragedy of individual immobility in a politically and socially corrupt world, solitude in an «alienated» land. This long-awaited biography, which was going to be called «La Casa» (The House) and in some way was being written in all

the stories and novels preceding *One Hundred Years*, all satellites, fragments of the total book-to-be, finally came out in 1967 but as a book bigger than the individual life of the colonel who seems to dominate the first third of the novel, only to be swept away by the winds of a family saga, a modern epic, an imaginary biography of Latin America.

Though García Márquez has often denied, to spite the critics, the influence of any Latin American writers upon him, including Borges and Carpentier, he has often mentioned not only Faulkner but Virginia Woolf as literary mentor (implying Borges' influence too, if only as the translator of *Orlando*). In Faulkner and Woolf, García Márquez once said in an interview, he found «un arte y un estilo».⁴ Even more prophetic is the following observation García Márquez makes in an article he wrote in 1950:

Todavía no se ha escrito en Colombia la novela que esté indudablemente y afortunadamente influida por los Joyce, por Faulkner o por Virginia Woolf. Y he dicho «afortunadamente», porque no creo que podríamos los colombianos ser, por el momento, una excepción al juego de las influencias. En su prólogo a «Orlando», Virginia confiesa sus influencias. . . . Algo hay - sobre todo en el manejo del tiempo - entre Huxley y otra vez Virginia Wolf (sic)... Si los colombianos hemos de decidimos acertadamente, tendríamos que caer irremediabilmente en esta corriente. Lo lamentable es que ello no haya acontecido aún, ni se vean los más ligeros síntomas de que pueda acontecer alguna vez.⁵

The early García Márquez, perhaps more sincere than the later literary *persona*, admits freely - without anxiety shall we say - to the impulse of influence, including Proust and Kafka in the «heritage» blindly ignored by Colombian writers - that is, until García Márquez came along.

Looking now at *Orlando*, one can easily see why a rich dialogue between the English satire and the Colombian epic was perceived. The narrator of *Orlando*, announcing the book as «A biography», tells the story of a young man from the Elizabethan era who lives through four centuries and even changes sex without the benefit of an operation, becoming a woman in the eighteenth century. Through this allegory Woolf parodies the course of English culture from the Renaissance to modern times. The parallels are obvious: Orlando's miraculous longevity and metamorphoses remind us of Ursula's (and even more the autumnal

Patriarch's) immortality, and of the repeated yet changing generations of Buendía men and women. Through the story of a family García Márquez satirizes the history of a continent, as Woolf does in *Orlando*. «*Orlando*,» one critic observed, «opened a door in Latin America to a world of fantastic narrative, the most ancient form of the art of story-telling and the only form until the eighteenth century when writers began to cultivate realism.»⁶

And just as García Márquez wrote his *One Hundred Years* in parody of History, as an affirmation of Fiction's truth over History or of History as an infinite series of contradictory stories, so did Woolf direct her satiric *Orlando* against the eighteenth and nineteenth century historical biography. She was opposing the authorial, official representation of reality as promoted by *the* Victorian progenitor, her own father Leslie Stephen, in whose Dictionary of National Biography there was no place for the «informal insight that brings people back to life.»⁷ On the other hand, in 1927 (when she was writing *Orlando*) Woolf praised Harold Nicolson—the husband of Orlando's real-life model, Victoria Sackville-West—for his inventive account of Edwardian England, titled *Some People*. Woolf commented that «He has devised a method of writing about people and about himself as if they were at once real and imaginary...» adding that «He has succeeded remarkably, if not entirely, in making the best of both worlds.»⁸ If Nicolson did not succeed in making the best of the imaginary real, Woolf and García Márquez certainly did. Not restricted by the temporal, causal ties of realism, *One Hundred Years's* heritage extends from the Bible to the Renaissance epic, the picaresque novel and finally to more modern versions of the imaginary life, such as Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, Marcel Schwob's *Vies imaginaires*, Woolf's *Orlando*, Borges' *Universal History of Infamy*, a family of eccentric, dissident texts as real and as fantastic as the Buendía clan.

A main key to the dialogue of these texts is again in «the handling of time» that García Márquez mentions in the cited chronicle, Time liberated from the tyranny of the clock. In these texts time is treated as freely as «matter or space, memory or oblivion, the law of causality or the existence (or non-existence) of angels . . . It's a time which juxtaposes episodes, summarizes in a single destiny the adventures of several different characters.»⁹ (Thus Amaranta Ursula is destined to fall in love with her nephew with the same inevitability that seals the fate of her great-aunt Amaranta, etc.) «It's a time that allows beings from different eras to meet: it is the time of the fable.»¹⁰ This «time of the fable» rules the narrator rather than being ruled by him. As Woolf once confessed in her

diary, December 1927: «I am still writing the third chapter of Orlando... It is drawing out longer than I meant.»¹¹ *Orlando* grows despite her/his author just as García Márquez's intended biography turns into an epic fantasy. Woolf added in the same illuminating fragment:

Orlando will meet Dr. Johnson, and perhaps write *To All You Ladies*. And so I shall get the effect of years passing, and then there will be a description of the lights of the 18th Century burning, and the clouds of the 19th Century rising. I want to write it all hastily, and so keep unity of tone, which in this book is very important. It has to be half-laughing, half-serious: with great splashes of exaggeration.

This description could apply to *One Hundred Years*, another string of hyperboles, another book whose unity (and plurality) of tone - the voices of García Márquez's superstitious grandmother *and* taletelling grandfather combined in one androgynous, anonymous narrative voice - is what ultimately structures the novel. Here, too, laughter and solemnity fuse just as Remedios' ascent to heaven is as real to Ursula as her daily housekeeping.

By allowing time an infinite flexibility, as Woolf says, «by recording atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,»¹² García Márquez could write the history or story of the colonel in one sentence as if he were all the colonels who ever fought in all the civil wars, as follows: «Informaciones simultáneas y contradictorias lo declaraban victorioso en Villanueva, derrotado en Guacamayal, devorado por los indios Motilones, muerto en una aldea de la ciénaga y otra vez sublevado en Urumita.»¹³ Again, as in Borges' «history» of «Lazarus» Morell (Morel, Murrell), history is many stories. Here García Márquez shows how a legend is born out of the contradictory versions that are a part of everyday life: everything he says could have occurred: but it is the temporal juxtaposition of the events, and the fact that what could only happen to many men has happened to one is what transports the man and the events to a mythic dimension.

Likewise Virginia Woolf telescopes in her protagonist's «history» the life of Victoria Sackville-West, that of her ancestor Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset (the real author in 1665 of the poem «*To All You Ladies*») and of Vita's writer-diplomat husband Harold Nicolson: the fable begins with Orlando as a poet-diplomat living in a sixteenth century house. But Orlando is both man and woman, no one and everyone, like the colonel, or

perhaps the androgynous or anonymous persona of Woolf the writer as the colonel is the solitary spirit of García Márquez. As the colonel is every colonel in every battle, so is Orlando the personification of Baroque, Rococo and Neoclassical literatures. The following summary from *Orlando* asserts the synchronic time of allegory: «She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid; and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried the drama.»¹⁴

Woolf's *Orlando* and Gracia Márquez's *Cien años*, as different and as alike as Cervantes' and Pierre Menard's *Quixote*, become one text which asserts that linear time is an illusion and that perhaps the circular metaphor corresponds to time as it really functions; also it is a text which speaks of the ultimate fictionality of all biographies and histories and therefore of the perhaps greater truth of imaginary history or biography -which brings us perhaps to the main topic of discussion in this intertextual dialogue.

Like Cervantes poking fun at epic biographers and their self-importance, Virginia Woolf pokes fun at authoritative biographers: «Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet!»¹⁵ In passing she mocks maternal authority as well, comparing a biographer to an over-proud mother, the matriarchy (as in Macondo) being as repressive as the patriarchy. Her satirical play with the reader continues as she pretends to be a self-conscious biographer, only of course to later reveal that the reader has been fooled into believing this is reality, or a «documented» biography, warning him teasingly that he is now approaching «undocumented territory».¹⁶ This ironic attitude toward authorship, favoring anonymity and at least a symbolic androgyny, is really an affirmation of the text, of a literature free of the dictates of either a patriarch or a matriarch. In a similar vein García Márquez merges the voices of grandfather and grandmother into an anonymous, collective third person, whose speech has already been spoken by the magician Melquíades, the writer within the text, a being who may not be of this world.

In their dialogue Woolf and García Márquez parody History by bringing together figures, both real and fantastic, from different eras, by creating characters who live forever, by recording supernatural events: Orlando's metamorphosis, Remedios' heavenly ascent, apocalyptic occurrences like the four year rains in Macondo or the great flood in a fantasmagorical London, where a turbulent city appears floating on the ice

of the rising river, life going in circles like the city round and round in the river.

But they parody History most of all by mocking its concept of progress. *Orlando's* narrator says ironically that the Elizabethans were not as advanced as today's citizens because «it has to be remembered that crime and poverty had none of the attraction for the Elizabethans that they have for us,»¹⁷ implying that we are more savage of course. We can all remember many a similar comment in *One Hundred Years*: Ursula says essentially the same when she claims that when magic ends it's because reality too is becoming impoverished: before there were gypsies with their marvelous lamps and flying carpets but now, «lo que pasa es que el mundo se va acabando poco a poco y ya no vienen esas cosas.»¹⁸ Progress is more like regress to Ursula. When the modern people try to bring airmail service to Macondo, the inhabitants are not the least impressed: air travel had already been conquered decades ago by the gypsies with their flying carpets.

The coming of the railroad has a parallel effect on Orlando born in the 16th century and Macondo born at the beginning of time. Describing Orlando's first train ride, the narrator again pokes fun at History: «That stupendous invention had (the historians say) completely changed the face of Europe in the past twenty years (as indeed happens much more frequently than historians suppose). She noticed that it was extremely smutty, rattled horribly, and the windows stuck.»¹⁹

Macondo's reaction to this marvel of technical progress, already commonplace to the rest of the world, is «Ahi viene un asunto espantoso como una cocina arrastrando un pueblo... En ese momento la población fue estremecida por un silbato de resonancias pavorosas y una descomunal respiración acezante.»²⁰ But the writer (the reader) is not laughing at Orlando's or Macondo's naiveté, but rather at the ironies of historical progress: Macondo's, Orlando's anachronism is a metaphor for reality's relentless circularity. Scientific progress can be as illusory or as real as gypsy tricks: science and magic are equally marvelous or real in the eye of the beholder. Just as reading *Orlando* through *Cien años de soledad* or viewing *Orlando* as the dubious mother of Macondo in yet another reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is as valid as an infinite number of readings, of satellites that revolve around García Márquez's circular ruins which, like the phoenix, rise again and again at each new reading.*

This reinterpretation of material discussed in *El espejo hablado* (see below) was read at the symposium on García Márquez at Wellesley College, April 9, 1983.

NOTES

- 1 Suzanne Jill Levine, *El espejo hablado* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1975).
- 2 «The Monumental Decision of the U.S. District Court Rendered Dec. 6, 1933 by Honor. John Woolsey Lifting the Ban on *Ulysses*,» in *Ulysses* by James Joyce (New York: Vintage Books, 1966). p. viii.
- 3 Jorge Luis Borges, «El arte narrativo y la magia,» in *Discusión* (1932), *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), p. 232.
- 4 Luis Harss, «Gabriel García Márquez o la cuerda floja,» *Los Nuestros* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1966), p. 396.
- 5 Gabriel García Márquez, «¿Problemas de la Novela?» *Obra periodística, Vol. I*, ed. Jacques Gilard (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1981), p. 269.
- 6 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, «Novedad y anacronismo en *Cien años de soledad*, » *Revista Nacional de Cultura* (Caracas: July-Sept. 1968), pp. 14-15.
- 7 John Russell, «A Few Well Chosen Words», *Sunday New York Times Book Review* (December 26, 1982), p. 47.
- 8 Quoted in Michiko Kakutani's review of *Some People*, *The New York Times* (December 29, 1982).
- 9 «Novedad y anacronismo en *Cien años de soledad*, » p. 15.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. III, 1925-1930 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), pp. 167-168.
- 12 Quoted by George McMurray, *Gabriel Garcia Márquez* (New York: Frederick UngarPub. Co., 1977), p. 13.
- 13 Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1967), p. 116.
- 14 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1928), p. 237.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 18 *Cien años de soledad*, p. 285.
- 19 *Orlando*, p. 160.
- 20 *Cien años de soledad*, pp. 192-193.