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Michael Bell

JOURNALISM AND/OR FICTION: THE WORLDS OF GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

Michael Bell
University of Warwick, Coventry, England

In the long and thorough introductions to his four volume edition of García Márquez' journalistic writing, Jacques Gilard has unfolded the developing and multi-faceted relationship between the journalism and the fiction.[1] Across the wide range of his journalistic output, from the comic persona of Septimus of the 'Jirafe' column in *El Heraldo* of Barranquilla through to his extended investigative reporting, García Márquez can be seen developing the skills of style and narrative, the blend of humor and political critique, which became the substance of his fiction. I do not wish to change a word of Gilard's account of the positive, formative significance of the journalism to the fiction except perhaps for his declaration that *no hay diferencias notables entre los plantamientos del periodista y los del escritor* (IV, 59). For it is important to recognize that the impact of the journalist on the writer acquires its positive value partly under a negative sign. As a highly successful journalist who was also an aspirant novelist, García Márquez was especially aware of the differences between these modes and the tension between them is a significant, although partly subterranean, preoccupation of his *oeuvre*.

The continuing, nagging presence of this question for García Márquez has a number of causes but it perhaps arises most fundamentally from his sense of the common root of journalism and fiction, at least in his case, as forms of truthtelling. In *La mala hora*, for example, the barber finds the ban on political conversation almost literally stifling. When asked why he risks such talk he says *uno está que revienta por hablar*.[2] The physicality of the phrase echoes a humorous article by García Márquez on the subject of journalism where he says *el periodismo es una necesidad biológica del hombre*. (III, 911) Journalism, in other words, expresses a fundamental human need to speak about what is going on in the world. At the same time, the barber's remarks, along with similar hints in the story, link the lampoons, which are the principal narrative motor of *La mala hora*, to the creative impulse underlying the tale. Is the tale

itself a kind of lampoon? Are the lampoons a primitive form of fiction?[3] This parallel is, of course, reinforced by the ambiguous authorship of the lampoons. Within the realistic world of the narrative their authorship is never revealed so that they are left floating ambiguously between a realistic explanation which happens not to be supplied or their being understood as an authorial symbolism and thereby insisting on the fictive nature of the whole. The generic variety within García Márquez' journalism reflects this larger point. There is always a deep continuity of impulse between the journalism and the fiction.

But the continuity of the creative impulse, and the fluidity of the generic distinctions across the range of his writing, made it more, rather than less, necessary for García Márquez to arrive at an understanding of the difference between his writing practices. This complementary truth is equally evident in the episode from *La mala hora*, for if the lampoons express the underlying impulse of both journalism and fiction, and thereby suggest a parallel between the barber's need to talk politics and the creation of the containing narrative, it is equally true that these parallels depend on our sense of the different orders which are involved. True parallels, after all, do not meet. Or, more strictly, they meet in infinity or in the obscure origins of artistic creation. To nest the journalism/fiction theme within an overt fiction, therefore, is to highlight difference as well as continuity. And from this point of view the ambiguous provenance of the lampoons serves to maintain the generic distinction.

I have discussed at length elsewhere how this generic tension of continuity and difference pervades the whole of García Márquez' fiction modulating from a focus on journalism and fiction in the earlier novellas to the grander theme of history and fiction in the later novels.[4] On the present occasion I want to consider how a similar tension is thematized, sometimes perhaps only half consciously, in the journalism. For just as the fiction distinguishes itself from the political commentary which is its partial motive, so the journalism highlights the fictional aspect of political reality. What is at stake is a metaphysical question rather than the thematic and narrative concerns ably discussed by Gilard.

In his early journalism particularly, García Márquez met the demand for a constant stream of humorous invention by recourse to some formulaic devices. One device was to take a common idea or expression and subject it to comic variation such as inverting it, extending it, or just taking it literally. In an article of August 1952, entitled *Lugares comunes*, he makes this device his explicit theme. He begins:

> La literatura, desde sus comienzos, y ahora el cine y las tiras cómicas, han traído al mundo una serie de lugares comunes que bien valdría la pena modificar, aunque sea para ver qué pasa. (I, 813)

Literature is put on a footing with comic strips here because functionally it is equally productive of stereotypes, but also because García Márquez' own

literary interest is always strongly anchored in the popular imagination; not just, that is to say, in the folkloric but in the forms of every day, modern urban consciousness including its mediation through the press, television and film. Although he admired the artistic dedication of Flaubert, García Márquez distanced himself from the Flaubertian attitude to the **idée reçue**, at least at the popular level, as was to become elaborately evident in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. His play with commonplaces, therefore, is not in any simply destructive spirit although it includes a measure of the deconstructive. It is most typically a humorously affectionate examination of those common expressions which hover on the brink of non-meaning and can only be grasped, if at all, with a sympathetic participation. Hence even in the present case, where the principal burden of the piece is to expose the cliché, the effect is still humorously creative as García Márquez imagines the reality which a particular cliché implies:

> Un lugar común en las tiras cómicas el pescador infortunado que aguarda un día entero, pacientemente, a que el pez muerda el anzuelo. Al final, el pescador, invariablemente, pesca una bote inservible. Los mares y los ríos y hasta los simples estanques de las tiras cómicas, están llenas de botas... (I, 814)

To explode the cliché here he expands it within its own humorous premises. His method is to create the world according to cliché and that suggests why a particularly significant body of cliché for him is precisely that surrounding the word 'world' itself.

Even as recently as August 1993, in a short speech honoring his friend, the poet Alvaro Mutis, García Márquez uses on five different occasions expressions turning on the word 'world'.[5] This has been a feature of his journalistic writing throughout his career and, although it is obviously conscious on each occasion, I find it difficult to credit that he is always aware at the time of the frequency with which he plays on this word. It rather has the revelatory implication of an unconscious habit. It is as if he were constantly turning over at some subliminal level a set of questions about what it means to inhabit a world. Furthermore, in so far as cliché represents a minimal degree of individual thought it may be the manifestation of a collective linguistic unconscious. In his play with this body of cliché, therefore, García Márquez is exploring the constant, implicit human activity of world creation and he does so in a popular, humorous and above all relativistic spirit. Some examples will clarify the possibilities.

Central to this body of cliché is the expression 'the most X in the world'. An article on the Miss Universe competition of 1954, for example, turns on the emptiness of this expression. He speaks of the fiancé of the new Miss Universe:

> ... que conoció, conmovido, la noticia de que, súbitamente, su novia había sido declarada oficialmente la mujer más bella del mundo, tal como él lo había creído siempre sin haber logrado convencer a muchos. (III, 907)

By taking it literally García Márquez catches the vacuity and the multiple vulgarity of the notion of the most beautiful woman in the world, and his earlier passing remark that the winner, the American contestant, has been **ligeramente bronceada** by the Caribbean sun hints at an inherent conceptual flaw in the implicit appeal to a world standard. Yet the very critique of the phrase simultaneously expresses an acceptance of it as an item of popular emotional rhetoric. For her finacé, she is indeed the most beautiful girl in the world just like the endless succession of the most wonderful girls in the world on the old forces favourites programmes. The expression becomes meaningful only at the point where it becomes completely private, where it ceases to have reference to **the** world at all.

In this respect this phrase is a meeting point for García Márquez' abiding themes of solitude and solidarity; it juxtaposes the incommensurable scales of the private and the global. For the full force of his play on this expression lies in his being a man with a truly world outlook who constantly needs to use the same expression in a completely literal sense. In the wake of the Suez crisis, for example, he wrote an article on Aristotle Onassis entitled *Cuando el mundo pierde solo esta hombre gana.* Here he refers quite literally to a world context although he goes on to exploit an ironic ambiguity in the phrase **todo el mundo** which inflects a geographical scope into political opportunism:

> Su mejor negocio fue la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Su pequeña flota, con bandera neutral, navegó por todos los mares con petróleo para todo el mundo. (IV, 449)

And after Nasser's nationalization of the Suez canal, Onassis *ordenó la construcción del petrolero más grande del mundo, 100.000 toneladas.* Here the ring of empty hyperbole in the cliché lingers around the literal reference affirmed by the statistic. The expression inflates the boat to a kind of grandiose unreality, worthy of the Patriarch, even while soberly reporting the fact, and the logic, of its existence.

The phrase, we might say, allows García Márquez to present reality here under the sign of unreality. Elsewhere it expresses the relativity of worlds. He remarks, for example, of the Shah of Persia in October 1956: *Personalmente, es lo que se llama un hombre de mundo en el occidente...* (IV, 417). The final three words, coming after the phrase *hombre de mundo,* quietly deflate the expression without detracting from the personal dignity of the Shah. Once again, the expression of a personal truth or value requires the term **mundo** even while hollowing out the word's claims to a substantive meaning.

This evacuation of meaning is strikingly developed in a piece from April 1950 about one Garry Davis who resigned his American citizenship to declare himself 'the first citizen of the world'. It is now evident why this *fait divers* touched a central nerve in García Márquez's imagination. From his opening

sentences he takes the phrase 'citizen of the world' literally and thereby drains it of meaning:

> Cuando la ONU se reunió en París, nació el primer ciudadano del mundo. Y nació a diferencia de los otros mortales, mayor de edad, fuerte y convenientemente alimentado. (I, 257)

Playing on the image of natural birth before revealing its purely metaphorical usage, García Márquez exposes the phrase 'citizenship of the world' as an unreality which then in turn reflects on the world efficacy of the UN and the meaningfulness of citizenship at large. Political reality is constantly pervaded by potent unrealities which he exposes by treating them as if they were real. I have remarked elsewhere how he plays with these same verbal formulae to superimpose the incommensurable scales of the local and the global; a double consciousness which is crucial to *Cien años de soledad*.[6] At present, I emphasize a different aspect: his interweaving of reality and unreality, his habit of turning the real world inside out. Garry Davis is a truly Marquesian character who literalizes the unreal to comment on the real. That he should also have been, as it were incidentally, an historical individual only enriches the point.

This inversion of worlds was no idle game for García Márquez who realized only too well that the reader is not moved by fact by *l'effet du réel*. Spending his apprentice years in a time of political terror and perceiving the realistic *novela de la Violencia* as inadequate, he was obliged to take the game of fiction very seriously.

In an article of June 1954 he comments ironically on the naive habit of the Colombian reading public of discussing the possible historical originals of fictional characters.

> Allí mismo, como quien dice, a la vuelta de la esquina, está todavía el olor a pólvora de la guerra de independencia, y sin embargo es motivo de controversia la identidad de un personaje literario que de haber existido sería apenas una distinguida y longeva matrona de un ciento de años, o un hermoso recuerdo de veinte años, con ochenta de yacer en su sepultura. (III, 892)

The passage is a good example of the double significance, positive and negative, of the journalism to the fiction. On the one hand, the references to the lingering whiff of gunpowder and the hundred year old matron, as well as the final note of mortality, suggest Ursula Buendía and the fateful historical condensation of *Cien años de soledad*. Yet García Márquez, in imagining the afterlife of the heroine, is once again exposing an unreal potency by entering its terms; in this case the Quixotic error of literalistic reading. Like Cervantes, he has no easy answer to the fundamental problematic of fictional meaning and power but he illuminates and negotiates it by a constant awareness of common errors. And so he goes on to note the other side of the question: that the urgent realism of the novels of *La Violencia* has gone unheeded:

> ... los novelistas de "la violencia" — que de algún modo hay que llamarlos — se esmeran en demostrar que sus personajes son absolutamente reales, y hay muy pocos lectores que dan crédito a sus testimonios.

The paradox of fiction, that its power of emotional persuasion is greater than that of fact, was a creative problem and opportunity for García Márquez which his journalism, with its direct responsibility to reality, first forced him to recognize and then taught him to exploit throughout his *oeuvre*.

In his early fiction elements of fantasy act as necessary distancing from a too naturalistic or testimonial texture. In *Cien años de soledad* this whole problematic is finally thematized by the narrative itself within the appropriately Cervantean frame of the fictitious historian. But as García Márquez remarks in his conclusion to this article, the ultimate achievement in the art of turning the real world inside out is to produce a mirror image so exact that its virtuality, its fictional condensation, is not even noticed although its power is felt:

> Que se creen nuevos personajes en la literatura colombiana, que es eso lo que importa, aunque no sean copias textuales de la vida real, sino mejor si son puras y maravillosas criaturas fantásticas. Aunque los escritores colombianos, para evitar confusiones, tengan que advertir en el futuro: "Cualquier parecido o semejanza entre personajes de esta novela o personajes de la vida real, no es pura coincidencia, sino el resultado de un laborioso esfuerzo del autor". (p. 893)

This ambition to close the gap of appearances, and to give an evident fiction the force of reality, is ultimately realized in some of García Márquez' late fiction. The whole narrative of *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, of course, turns on the question of coincidence whereby fiction and life have become scandalously indistinguishable both for the narrator and for his predecessor the examining magistrate. But the most distinguished, and world historical, instance is *El general en su laberinto*, where Bolívar's Quixotic utopia of regional solidarity is treated in a mode of sober, even downbeat, realism in sharp contrast to the magical charm of *Cien años de soledad*. But here perhaps Márquez is at his most cunning in nudging the reader to start the whole process again, to turn the world of this historical fiction inside out, and to see Bolívar's utopian fantasy of regional solidarity and liberation as a still possible historical reality.

FOOTNOTES

1 *Obra Periodística*, ed. Jacques Gilard, Vol. 1 *Textos Costeños*, Vol. II *Entre Cachacos I*, Vol. III *Entre Cachacos II*, Vol. IV *De Europa y América (1955-1960)* (Barcelona, Bruguera, 1982).

2 *La mala hora* (Barcelona, Plaza y Janés, 1974) p. 50.

3 For an ingenious, perhaps too ingenious, discussion of this see Wolfgang A. Luchting 'Lampooning Literature, *La mala hora*' in McMurray George R., ed., *Critical Essays on Gabriel García Márquez* (Boston, Hall, 1987) pp. 93-102.

4 *Gabriel García Márquez: Solitude and Solidarity* (London, Macmillan, 1993).

5 *El Tiempo* Bogotá, Sunday, August 29, 1993, pp. 10-120.

6 *Gabriel García Márquez* op. cit., pp. 52-57.