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From *La hojarasca* to *Cien años de soledad*: Gabriel García Márquez's Labyrinth of Nostalgia

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ABSTRACT

It is now a commonplace of Latin American literary criticism that Gabriel García Márquez's *La hojarasca* (1955) (*Leafstorm*) is the key intertext and the precursor for the Colombian writer's *magnum opus*, *Cien años de soledad* (1967) (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*). But exactly how *La hojarasca* was remodelled for *Cien años de soledad*, especially in terms of structure and theme, has received insufficient attention. This essay posits the consciousness-raising under the impact of the Cuban Revolution as the central factor in García Márquez's decision to re-fashion a tale of individual tragedy into a collective one. In spite of this renovation, however, and in counterpoint to the optimism of the Cuban Revolution, *Cien años* remains deeply imbued with an overwhelming sense of nostalgia and personal loss, which is then projected as both pessimistic national history and transcendental category.

For all its sudden impact on the reading public, the themes and characters of Gabriel García Márquez's celebrated 1967 novel, *Cien años de soledad*, already existed, scattered throughout his earlier fictions. They include the now characteristic atmospherics of solitude and tragedy, the sense that *el pueblo*, representative of any number of small Colombian towns, exists outside the march of history and thus outside modernity, encumbered by an archaic moral code of sexual repression and vengeance, unable to influence a course of events, which seems to follow a pre-ordained, cyclical pattern, ending in loss and defeat. Spiritual and physical solitude recurs in the later works, now accompanied by such tropes as the inexplicable intrusion of irrational forces into human life, an enduring scepticism toward science and technology, and the arrival of enigmatic strangers who disrupt daily routines and set in motion uncontrollable events and their consequences. The composite of these themes is the impact of modernity and modernisation on inward-looking, static communities.

But while many of these themes deal with the ills of Colombian society, they never coalesce into a general portrait of national failure, as they do in the masterwork. Yet many of the most common readings of *Cien años* frame the novel as a universalising allegory of Latin American history or even Western history since the Enlightenment,¹ in spite of obvious references to key events in Colombian national history, events which precipitate the decline of the idealistic community represented in the novel. Whereas such universalising interpretations can undeniably claim warrant from the text, the novel is also, and more importantly, solidly located in the founding of the modern, post-independence Colombian nation-state. It is a blending of personal and national history, a complex weave of nostalgia for the lost opportunity to construct an egalitarian society and a kind of Proustian nostalgia for lost childhood, clearly explained by the author himself in *El olor de la guayaba*: "I only wanted to leave a poetic statement about the world of my childhood" ([García Márquez 1982](#): 75). In spite of its undoubted humour, then, *Cien años*'s dominant thematic is decadence and decay, melancholy, loss, and dissolution, in short a *fall* of biblical proportions. Thus nostalgia becomes an orienting theme at both the personal and political levels and underpins the meditation on solitude referred to in the title.

Mario Vargas Llosa, an astute commentator on García Márquez's early works, refers to the "orgánica inter-relación" ([Vargas Llosa 1971](#): 244) between the early, shorter fiction and *Cien años*. Yet in spite of the obvious associations alluded to above, it is the Colombian novelist's very first novel, *La hojarasca* (1955) that continues to be the key intertext to *Cien años de soledad*. Although this has now become a commonplace of García Marquesian literary criticism,² the particular way in which *La hojarasca* was remodelled for *Cien años* has received insufficient attention. This paper seeks to rectify this lack. I begin by briefly glossing the plot of *Cien años* before moving to the parallelisms with *La hojarasca*.

A clearing in the jungle

Cien años de soledad begins with a memory of a future past, when Aureliano Buendía, in front of a firing squad, recalls the day he was taken by his father to get to know ice for the first time. The reader is immediately denied narrative explanation, however, since the whole first chapter becomes a parenthetical description of the initial founding of a village in the middle of a remote tropical jungle. The chapter closes by returning to Aureliano's "experiencia prodigiosa" of seeing and touching ice for the first time. Not until halfway through the novel, however, does the initial narrative disclosure finally bridge the time lag, when we face the firing squad with Aureliano. This time, narrative expectation is denied, as Aureliano avoids what we have been led to believe is the *fait accompli* of his execution. The reader is also aware by now that, although he is one of the central characters, Aureliano's story is but one instance of a much larger, collective tale of the rise and fall of an idealistic community, dominated by several generations of a provincial, Creole aristocratic family. The novel's temporal loops and flashbacks, the foretelling of individual and collective fates, their frequent and often humorous postponement and the continuous blurring of fiction and reality, induce a narrative disorientation that mimics the life frustrations of the characters themselves. The narrative device of foretelling thus conveys on the level of structure the predestination that underpins the novel philosophically.

Cien años is organised loosely into three large thematic sections or narrative blocs: firstly, the utopian foundation of the town of Macondo; secondly, the town's consolidation, development, expansion and the onset of crisis; and lastly, its decline and destruction. The attentive reader familiar with Latin American history soon recognises certain locative cues that pertain specifically to Colombian national history and so the story of Macondo allegorically parallels the foundation, consolidation and eventual violent decline of the Colombian national state, an interpretation shared by, among others, [Lucila Mena \(1979\)](#) and [Stephen Minta \(1987\)](#). There are several key moments of transition in the novel—the arrival of the gypsies, the Indians, the banana company, the train—and most amount to outside influences intruding on a settled way of life, a common trope in García Márquez's stories. But it is the government's intrusion that wrests control of the town's destiny away from its own people and articulates Macondo into the national project. The town's population grows rapidly as it is invaded by a shiftless rabble of adventurers, gamblers, whores and itinerant workers drawn to its newfound prosperity. These are part of the *hojarasca*—the *human trash*—that arrives to unsettle established mores and social hierarchies.

Periodic forgetfulness, especially of the crucial events that shape the town, remains a structural constant throughout the novel, manifest in repetition and circularity: the recurring personality traits and names of the Buendía offspring; the seemingly endless civil wars (which all end in failure); the subsequent refuge of a defeated Aureliano in the empty ritual of making little gold fish, melting them down and remaking them; the cycles of frustration, unfulfilment and tragic death that curse the lineage. The novel seems to suggest that the inability to learn from one's mistakes, the lack of historical consciousness, becomes the principal curse visited on Macondo's history and thus a crucial factor in the events surrounding the massacre of the banana workers ([Rama 1973](#); [Bell-Villada 1990](#); [Martin 1987](#); Minta 1987). The historical weight of war, political betrayal, economic depression, and successive moral failures on behalf of its ruling elite—the Buendías—eventually leads to destruction. García Márquez symbolically kills off a class parasitic upon the majority of the population, their *unholy* nature symbolised by the biblical curse visited on their successively inbreeding generations.

Cien años de soledad is a history witnessed and experienced from the *inside*. By locating the narrative voice within the community of Macondo, within the ruling elite of the Buendías, García Márquez is able to avoid the declamatory style of earlier socialist realisms. He allows the Colombian bourgeoisie to reveal their decadence through their own actions. Rather than resort to the Freudian-modernist device of evoking fractured subjectivity through stream-of-consciousness narration and abrupt, cinematic-style time shifts (the time shifts are there, the difference is that they are announced in oral story-telling mode), García Márquez's way around classical realist mimesis and narrative omniscience is simply to situate his story-telling at the level of popular culture, focalising events through the consciousness of the townspeople, who through their selective memory reanimate the past. Moreover, instead of problematising the language of representation, his magical realism transforms the object of representation itself, allowing the magical and superstitious world of oral folk culture to *represent itself*, as it were. This magical-realist technique combines with the novel's main themes, since by allowing the townspeople to reveal their own motivations or bewilderment at an unforeseen course of events; the reader is invited to observe, with the omniscient but un-intrusive narrator, the structure of fate which dominates Macondo.

There is therefore a tragic consciousness at work in *Cien años*, as reminiscent of *tragic realism* as of Marquesian *magical realism*. Though the central protagonist, Aureliano Buendía, is not a tragic figure in any strictly classical sense (he does not know his fate), he withdraws from society after the defeat of his values and accepts historical oblivion. John Orr writes of the tragic realist novel that "the terms of the structure of feeling ... are those of lost opportunities, broken dreams, necessary failure and betrayal. All constitute the failure of values to be authenticated" ([Orr 1989](#): 52-53). Orr sees tragic realism as arising with critical social theory early in the nineteenth century, as the literary form of the "passionate political":

a vision of progress that contains an immanent critique, a sense of historical transformation which it then

challenges through scepticism and disillusion or evolutionary exhortation ... internalising a general ambivalence towards Progress ... the analogue of tragic realism is in turn the unresolved conflict and class strife of modern history (Orr 1989: 4).

As a form whose genesis lies in the decline of the European aristocracy (much as [Lucien Goldmann](#) theorised in *Le dieu caché* [1959]), tragic realism in fiction can be traced in a direct line from Dostoevsky to the present day: “tragic realism reveals the flaws and failures in the quest for community” (Orr 1989: 5). It is difficult not to see in this a more or less accurate description of *Cien años*. Such tragic structure has been a constant throughout García Márquez’s writings, finding its most *classical* expression in the much earlier *La hojarasca*, and it is to this novel we can turn for an understanding of subsequent evolutions in the Colombian writer’s style and thematics.

La hojarasca

La hojarasca was written as early as 1950-51, but was not published until 1955. It too deals with the founding of a community and its eventual decline, but the time span is significantly shorter and the overall story less an allegory of national failure than a re-working of Sophocles’ tragedy, *Antigone*. The moral centre of the novel gravitates around the tragic struggle between an individual conscience—a retired colonel trying to bury his friend, a French doctor—and the community, which is opposed to the burial because the doctor had refused to treat the townspeople before his death. However, the novel uneasily gestures towards two major themes which fail to complement each other at the level of fundamental structure: the modern rewriting of a Greek tragedy centred on individual consciousness; and the collective tale of the legacy of neo-colonial exploitation.

The two-page prologue intones the negative impact of the arrival of the banana company on the town, leading the reader to assume that this will be of central importance:

De pronto, como si un remolino hubiera echado raíces en el centro del pueblo, llegó la compañía bananera perseguida por la hojarasca... desperdicios humanos... rastros de una guerra civil ... La hojarasca era implacable. Todo lo contaminaba de su revuelto... En menos de un mes arrojó sobre el pueblo los escombros de numerosas catástrofes anteriores a ella misma... En medio de aquel ventisquero... los primeros éramos los últimos, nosotros éramos los forasteros ([García Márquez 1969](#): 9-10).

The reader is also informed that the displaced *nosotros* (*we*) referred to by the narrator had themselves arrived from a civil war and were thus but an earlier incarnation of the same complex process of dis-embedding caused by war and migration to new centres of economic development. The narrator then affirms that the *hojarasca* (the leafstorm—the migrant workers from other towns) eventually “logró unidad y solidez; y sufrió el natural proceso de fermentación y se incorporó a los gérmenes de la tierra”. (10) The discourse manifest in the opening two pages is thus complex: a patrician vision, initially hostile to the newcomers, nevertheless recognises, albeit begrudgingly, the inevitability and legitimacy of change. This ambivalence is specifically the narrator’s point of view and, though from within the collective *we*, does not extend to the whole group. Nevertheless, in spite of having set the scene thus, the focus then switches to the battle of wills between the colonel and the townspeople, as narrated through the consciousness of the colonel, his daughter and his grandchild. The history of the banana company’s arrival and subsequent departure is soon reduced to a backdrop against which the moral dilemma is played out.

There are other continuities between *Cien años* and *La hojarasca*, in addition to references to civil war and the banana company. The metaphor of the *hojarasca*, the *leafstorm*, also doubles in *Cien años* for the hurricane that will sweep away all traces of the town. It is signalled at the end of *La hojarasca* as Isabel is meditating on the town’s ruinous state after the banana company’s departure: “Veo la casa por la ventana y pienso que mi madrastra está allí, inmóvil en su silla, pensando quizá que antes de que nosotros regresemos habrá pasado ese viento final que borraré este pueblo” (129). This scene is reprised in two forms in *Cien años*: the apocalyptic wind which does indeed arrive and destroy Macondo; and the earlier event, when Meme Buendía is banished by her mother, Fernanda, to a convent. Her departure in shame is projected onto the now degraded landscape, in stark contrast to her joyous arrival from boarding school “a través de la antigua región encantada”. Images of ruin now increasingly signify the transition wrought by entrepreneurial capitalism:

No vio las casas blancas de los gringos, ni sus jardines aridificados por el polvo y el calor ... las carreteras de bueyes cargadas de racimos en los caminos polvorientos ... las barracas abigarradas y miserables de los trabajadores ... en cuyos portales había niños verdes y escuálidos sentados en sus bacinillas, y mujeres embarazadas que gritaban improprios al paso del tren ... No miró a través de la ventanilla ni siquiera cuando se acabó la humedad ardiente de las plantaciones, y el tren pasó por las llanuras de amapolas donde estaba todavía el costillar carbonizado del galeón español, y salió luego al mismo aire diáfano y el mismo mar

The narrative ambivalence detected in the prologue to *La hojarasca* is maintained in *Cien años* but also in modified form: the narrator neither overtly identifies with the characters nor retreats after the initial passage, but still intimately knows the town's history. The master stroke in *Cien años* is, firstly, to conceal from the reader the fact that the omniscient narrator (Melquíades) speaks from within the community, and secondly, to convert what is merely a retrospective eyewitness account in *La hojarasca* into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whereas in *La hojarasca* the narrative action mainly concerns a time period between 1903 and 1928 (there are references to a late nineteenth-century civil war, from which the family fled in search of a peaceful place to live, but very little elaboration), these dates are extended on both sides in *Cien años*; the family's history is pushed back to the sixteenth century, a much less specific historical co-ordinate, imbuing the story with more epic sweep; and the future is extended to encompass and complete the prophecy of total destruction, thereby further accentuating the mythical dimensions. There are other more subtle modifications in the passage from *La hojarasca* to *Cien años*: where a fantastic or supernatural event in *La hojarasca* is debunked—the barber's daughter supposedly marries a strange spirit, but the episode is exposed as an invention *within* the narrative—in *Cien años* such events are left as such, since the point of focalisation is largely with the townspeople and their inability to see outside their circumscribed and superstitious world.

But whilst there are continuities between the novels, there are also major differences, and these are significant. In *La hojarasca*, the banana company and its workers are secondary to the main theme. Nor do the civil wars have any direct effect on the town. In *Cien años*, however, the emphasis shifts. The civil wars now have a major and lasting impact on Macondo—the Buendías lose their pre-eminent position and power in the community; and the migrant workers, the *human waste* of *La hojarasca*, are no longer referred to as such. Whereas negative references remain to those who come in the wake of the banana company seeking easy money—“Los antiguos habitantes de Macondo se encontraban arrinconados por los advenedizos”; and their arrival leaves the town “convulsionado por la vulgaridad con que los forasteros despilfarraban sus fáciles fortunas” (García Márquez 1967: 217)—they are accompanied by a more subtle differentiation between *the rabble* and the exploited banana workers, the latter now portrayed as exemplary victims of neo-colonialism.

A further significant change is over the question of fatalism. In *La hojarasca*, the historical order appears fixed and pre-determined, prompting Vargas Llosa to declare the novel “idealista” (Vargas Llosa 1971: 269)—values cannot change, they are immutable, outside history. In addition, some of the interior monologues directly refer to mysterious forces controlling destiny. Thus the colonel: “Desde cuando el doctor abandonó nuestra casa, yo estaba convencido de que nuestros actos eran ordenados por una voluntad superior contra la cual no habríamos podido rebelarnos” (García Márquez 1969: 121; emphasis in the original). Vargas Llosa comments perceptively on the significance of the arrival of the banana company and the *leaf storm* as “cataclismos físicos”:

Para esta visión fatalista, la historia es una sucesión de *fenómenos* similares a los naturales, en el sentido en que no son controlables ni modificables ... El destino precede al individuo... [*The novel is*] individualista, idealista, fatalista ... [es] esencialista: El hombre es una esencia anterior a su existencia, que la praxis no puede en ningún caso cambiar (Vargas Llosa 1971: 270).

Consequently, *La hojarasca* displays a distinct lack of rebellious consciousness against the course of events, save in the colonel's obstinate insistence on burying his friend, which is not a collective gesture against historical trends, but is rather circumscribed within the re-enactment of the *Antigone* tragedy. It is significant that the novel ends without the reader's knowing whether the doctor is ever finally buried.

In *Cien años* predestination is now handled allusively, via simile (*as if...*) and no overt reference is made to “fuerzas misteriosas”. In fact, we learn in a characteristic Marquesian aside that the French doctor was indeed buried against the town's will, suggesting a less immutable destiny. Furthermore, the decisions taken by the various Buendías—Aureliano's brutality in war, for example—directly contribute to their demise. Their fate is as it is, in part, *precisely because* they have made bad decisions, been impulsive, and so on. The vicissitudes of human nature are now a key factor, like the civil wars and the banana company. The fatalism is still there—the overall destiny of Macondo moves within the predetermined structure implied by the Melquíades manuscripts—but with the suggestion that things could have been different. These subtle alterations in structure in moving from *La hojarasca* to *Cien años* marked a deepening of historical understanding in García Márquez, especially in a Third World nationalist and socialist context. The consciousness-raising under the influence of the Cuban Revolution is palpable: *La hojarasca* was written nearly ten years before the revolution, *Cien años* six years after.

In spite of such consciousness-raising, *Cien años* ends on a wholly pessimistic note: the idealistic community is destroyed by an apocalyptic wind. Why such an ending, given the supposed consciousness-raising under the impact of the Cuban Revolution on a whole generation of artists and intellectuals, and why tell a tragic tale with such frequent humour? Perhaps telling the tale in humorous style (even though within an overall tragic structure) is a way of removing the events from history—the past is to be laughed away as inauthentic, as insignificant in the course of national or continental history, as the prophetic ending to *Cien años* loudly proclaims. In this ludic-apocalyptic tale, either history merely provides scenic detail for humorous elaboration, or else it is a way of letting go of the painful ‘pre-history’ of the period from independence to the promise of the Cuban Revolution. The Argentine historian, Tulio Halperín Donghi shares the latter view:

this literature, neither militant nor escapist, which appears to evoke what was a Hispanic American Calvary, as if the fatalities that appeared to govern it had completely lost their potency, this literature is recognized as the most kindred to the spirit of a mass of readers who were becoming more and more militant (Halperín Donghi 1981: 154-155, trans. mine).

This is why, Halperín Donghi explains, readers are invited to “have a good time with the author”. Furthermore, and here we can only agree with Halperín Donghi:

this hour of ephemeral Hispanic American hope ... [recalls] the inaugural moment of the independence struggle; then too it was believed that an already tangible future was being lived in which Hispanic America would shake off all of the fatalities which had weighed on its entire history (Halperín Donghi 1981: 155, trans. mine).

Such ludic readings of national or continental history well may provide a cathartic means of liberating oneself from the burden of a violent and unjust history. But what is lost at the expense of such a representation? There is a clear implication that, by merely willing it so, the past can be cancelled at the stroke of the novelist’s pen, as he or she comes to consciousness of its *inauthenticity*. This was indeed the structure of attitude among the Boom writers in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. But how quickly such hopes can be dashed has been shown by the successive crises of Latin American nation-states since the 1960s, including Cuba whose revolutionary ideals now seem a pale caricature.

There is, however, yet another plausible explanation for the pessimistic ending. The homogenising, centralising drive of the nation-state and its ideology of developmentalism work against regionalism and pre-modern social orders. The characteristic contradictions in the stance of a social group that considers itself legitimate or authentic, rather than merely one stage in historical change, have been perceptively analysed in Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*. Through an analysis of the English pastoral, Williams charts how the transition from a primarily rural to an urban population gave rise to deep antagonisms between country and city. A central and recurring motif in much of this literature is the deep nostalgia for the loss of a more harmonious and organic past. There are striking parallels between some of this literature, in which an aristocratic and orderly past is set in counterpoint to the ravages of industrial capitalism, and the world evoked in *Cien años*.

Nostalgia is normally hostile to change. But it is the *reaction* to change, rather than change *per se*, which is important in analysing the ideologies at work in artistic representations of the past. Such reactions usually have, as Williams asserts, “more real and more interesting social causes” (Williams 1973: 35). Typically, nostalgic tropes idealise the past, not as a whole, but only in that part associated with happiness or a sense of security and well-being. Such past plenitude is organised around a set of values, a set of ideal economic and social relations. The idealised image of the coastal house in *Cien años*, the family mansion, is of course a vision based on the well-to-do resident, as landed capital comes into conflict with trading capital. It is a common trope for the settled social hierarchy of an aristocratic way of life to be used as the basis for an idealist critique of capitalism and crass materialism, of sudden demographic changes, even of changes to the landscape (we see the latter in García Márquez’s parody of the god-like status of the banana company, altering the climate and the course of the river around Macondo). But coastal Colombia, even in peaceful times, was the site of exploitation: most places are, at any time in history. What we have here is myth functioning as memory and *vice versa*.

Williams writes: "the pull of the idea of the country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernisation, development" (*Ibid*). The conflict of values and perspectives in the transition from a predominantly rural to an urban society can occur within a lifetime, as it did for García Márquez. What is economic growth and national incorporation from one historical perspective becomes progressive social decay from another. How one views modernisation, as a liberation from the drudgery of the past or the irrevocable loss of a more authentic and wholesome way of life, will determine the perspective one brings to bear on change. Williams refused to opt decisively for either vision, seeing advantages and disadvantages in each. He was

much more concerned with the class-based, exploitative aspects of both spaces: the urban *and* the rural. Which prompts the observation that there is something altogether missing in the account of Macondo's development: the exploited rural workers only seem to appear in all their degradation *after* the arrival of the banana company; hitherto, the town is a hard-working rural paradise, its inequalities elided and reduced to the petty jealousies and rivalries between the opposing clans, the Buendías and the Moscotes.

Despite the comic spoofing of José Arcadio's schemes, the early Macondo is depicted in quasi-idyllic terms. This is where we register a first omission or falsification in the idealistic portrayal of the past. Secondly, *Cien años* sets up a dichotomy between the national capital and the provinces, one of the classic oppositions of modernity. Both sides of the binary trade on tired old myths: either the city and modernity are decadent and destructive, or the backwardness and deprivation of the regions retards national advancement. The growth of the nation and the incorporation of its outlying areas is depicted in *Cien años* as an increasing concentration of power in the hands of a national government given to seemingly arbitrary action. Bogotá came to play this role for García Márquez himself who, like a good *costeño*, seems to have retained an abiding dislike for the capital, even to the point of perpetuating myths about the supposed defects of Andean psychology.³ So much for the unity of imagined communities.

Clearly, representations of periods of rapid transition vary according to whether the representer is imagined as winner or loser. A local instance of aggressive historical change is elevated by García Márquez into a myth, which then provides the template for an outline of national history. The writer's own personal history, dominated by solitude and loss, is projected onto the social history of a region, which then does double duty for national history. Personal memory is displaced into social history and textualised as fiction: for García Márquez, as for Aureliano Buendía, wealth and fashion have replaced the *simple* virtues of thrift and hard work. This point is alluded to in *Cien años*: "Los antiguos habitantes de Macondo se encontraban arrinconados por los advenedizos"; and their arrival leaves the town "convulsionado por la vulgaridad con que los forasteros despilfarraban sus fáciles fortunas" (217). The theme is worked up into a narrative of progressive social decay, symbolised by natural decay and the creation of a ruined landscape. The eventual solution to failure in the quest for community is to banish all and sundry beyond history in a biblical holocaust that engulfs both the guilty and the innocent; in doing so the author tends to level the blame. Therefore, despite the fact that the local elite (the Buendías) and the banana workers are elevated to a position of authenticity in the novel, they too must regrettably disappear, overwhelmed by destiny.

Even though the literary recuperation of the massacre of the banana workers, which had been expunged from conventional Colombian national history, appears to contradict the patrician vision, both are nevertheless linked symbolically by a deep antipathy toward capitalist modernity, the ruthlessness of which destroys not only a purported pre-modern harmony, but also the lives of those most expendable in its inexorable progress. This romantic-conservative structure of feeling—the past against the present, the rural against the city, the communitarian against individualism, the established order against the newly ambitious—grounds the narrative ideologically. The aristocratic provincial order is destroyed by the outside influences of industry, national government and the proletarian masses, in short, by the penetration of capitalist social relations. The textual solution is the biblical hurricane. Thus the historical eclipse of one class or group modulates into a metaphysical solitude, the human condition painted in tragic terms, the death of the *race*: "las estirpes condenadas a cien años de soledad no tenían una segunda oportunidad sobre la tierra" (*Cien años* 351). The radical pessimism of this account, of both human nature and of Colombian history, should be evident.

In his enormously influential tract, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1959), [Octavio Paz](#) explored the supposed defects in the Mexican psyche, which he saw as dominated by solitude, and thus deflecting the nation from its collective historical destiny. In one of the appendices, he expands on the theme, declaring that modern life is defined by the absence of love and communion, which is the opposite of solitude. This is the theme García Márquez seems to take up in *Cien años* and which he has remarked upon in interviews, most notably in *El olor de la guayaba* (García Márquez 1982: 51; 57; 65; 78; 91). When asked about the importance of solitude in *El otoño del patriarca*, as compared to *Cien años*, he unambiguously replied: "Pero habla [*El otoño*] de la soledad del poder y no de la soledad de la vida cotidiana. Lo que en *Cien años de soledad* se cuenta se parece a la vida de todo el mundo" (65). Here García Márquez is still under the sway of existentialism and a preoccupation with solitude that concerned writers like Sartre and Camus from an earlier generation, who had a profound influence on both García Márquez and Vargas Llosa.

Though García Márquez's childhood was marked by solitude—and his view that we are all, ultimately, solitary beings may well be a heart-felt conviction—it in no way follows that it is the reality for everyone, especially amongst his fellow Colombians. For many, the only way to survive in a society dogged by poverty and under-employment is on the level of the extended family, the street, the *barrio* and the system of *compadrazgo*. It is altogether an exaggeration for the alienated bourgeois intellectual or artist, dismayed by the commodification and transience of modern culture or by the loss of childhood, to elevate personal angst into a national or transcendental category. Williams cautioned against the dangers of such idealisations of the past through personal memory: "Great confusion is caused if the real childhood memory is projected, unqualified, as history" ([Williams 1984](#): 298). Throughout *Cien años* the underlying constant is this prior 'fall', which returns over and over to curse subsequent generations. Welded to a requiem for childhood

certainly, it becomes entangled in a self-generated labyrinth of nostalgia and so arrives at the novel's pessimistic finale. But we need to separate out the various strands that have contributed to this sense of solitude, rather than simply accept it as a believable portrait of what is, in spite of the injection of humorous interludes, a profoundly negative representation of history, whether Colombian, Latin American or universal. Nostalgia's revenge can be murderous.

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NOTES

1. The following are samples of universalist interpretations: James Higgins, *Cien años de soledad* historia del hombre occidental. *Cuadernos del Sur*, 11, 1972, pp. 303-14; Gullón, R. (1970). *García Márquez o el olvidado arte de contar*, Madrid: Taurus. Gullón even thinks restricting the novel to Spanish America is erroneous: “without denying its relative location within Colombian geography... it transcends all geography and proposes a vast parable of Creation”, p. 151 (trans. mine). Philip Swanson chooses to emphasise the anti-rationalism of the novel: *Cómo leer a Gabriel García Márquez*. Madrid: Ediciones Júcar, 1991.
2. Janes, R. (1981). *Gabriel García Márquez: Revolutions in Wonderland*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, p. 26; and Bell-Villada, G. (1990). *García Márquez: The Man and his Work*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 145.
3. In a 1968 interview, he expressed his dislike of the people and the life in the capital Bogotá and his first impressions as an adolescent: “todos los cachacos andaban de negro, parados ahí con paraguas y sombreros de coco ... no resistí y me puse a llorar... Bogotá para mí es aprehensión y tristeza. Los cachacos son gente oscura, y me asfixio en la atmósfera que se respira en la ciudad”. Interview with Daniel Samper quoted in Mario Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio*, Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1971, p. 29. Such observations, as always with García Márquez, are filtered through the impact being sent to boarding school in Bogotá had on him. In effect, it signalled the end of his childhood idyll (See Bell-Villada, G. [1990]). *García Márquez: The Man and his Work*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 45-46).

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