CIEN ANOS DE SOLEDAD AS A HISTORY BOOK

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Let me sum up the present state of my thinking about why 100 Years of Solitude is a good book for people to read at the beginning stages of the study of Latin American history.

I first read it in 1968 or 9, because my Mexican wife and an Argentine friend were reading it for a course at the University of Wisconsin taught by a Chilean professor who thought it was the greatest novel of Latin America. They used to chuckle while they read it, and raved about it, so I read it. I thought it was terrific, and was reminded on the way through it time and time again of people I'd known in Latin America, and places I'd seen. Then for a couple of years I'd bring it up in conversations with people here and there: an Argentinian and a Peruvian in Seville, a Spanish poet in Barcelona, a Portuguese novelist and a Swedish journalist in Lisbon, an anthropologist and a government archivist in Rio, a sociologist and bookdealer in Bogotá, a historian, a Haitian refugee economist, a literature teacher and a novelist in Mexico City, a Portuguese poet in Santa Barbara.

I learned that it was the best-selling novel of all time in Latin America, and that it had quickly been translated into Portuguese, English, Italian, French, & German. Rave reveiws in conventional Latin American literature journals, but also in La Marcha of Montevideo & in various Cuban publications. It seemed to me like of all the books I'd read the book with the most truths about Latin America in it.

Then that spring in Mexico City, before coming to teach at UC Santa Cruz, I went to a lecture about magical realism in the new Latin American

novel -- and though I don't remember anything about the lecture, it was during it that I decided that the novel was essential reading for Latin American historians for reasons which were not necessarily the same as the reasons for its being a great novel.

The first thing to be said is that 100 años is of course not a history book. I have been asking that question somewhat ironically all along. It is a novel -- in some senses a historical novel, but a novel just the same. Like a history book, it is based on a careful gathering of information -- in this case more from the author's life experience and the oral tradition than from books and archives -- and it contains an artful arrangement of that information in the form of a story which conforms to the author's notion of truth. But is has no scholarly apparatus for verifying the author's affirmations, and carrying them on to new approximations of truth. It makes no distinction between things that happened and things that only might have happened. It takes place nowhere in particular. The personalities are fictitious. It makes much more liberal use of hyperbole than history books can get away with doing.

There are many differences between 100 años and a history book. One of them, sad though it is to say, is that it is a much better book -- better written, more interesting, with more to say to almost any reader -- than any history book. But the similarities between 100 anos and a history book are great enough, it seems to me, for us to conceive of the relationship between novels and history books as a continuum along which books can be arranged according to how they fulfill the requirements for each. Such a relationship with 100 anos cannot fail to be beneficial to the history book. Among the kinds of things Garcia Marquez does so well in his book are things historians ought to do (and things readers of newspapers and of history books ought to do as well) -- and it is in that sense, or for that reason, that 100 anos has

seemed to me desirable reading matter for students of Latin American history.

To begin with, there is a matter of language. Garcia Marquez writes better than virtually any historian. That is an understatement. But what are some of the elements of his use of language?

One thing is that he is exceedingly efficient in the use of words. He uses as few as possible for the most part, to say what needs to be said. He is never guilty of flowery excesses, or of prolix dissertations which bog down the movement of his narrative. There is none of the effusive lyricism that is supposed by English speakers to be associated with the tropical, and particularly the Latin American, mentality. Nor is there any intrusion of the writer's person; Garcia Marquez is rigorously "objective" in his treatment of his subject matter.

This characteristic can be attributed to a high degree of self-discipline, certainly a desirable feature in historians. I think that the peculiarities of Garcia Marquez' language have more to do with the unpretentious language and life-style of the inarticulate country people who are Garcia Marquez' subject and who seem to have taught him much of what he knows. In a similar way, the language of historians and the language of newspaper and history-book readers talking about other peoples, can be shorn of prententiousness and pomposity and polixity and ponderosity if it conceives of itself as a language of real people.

Related to the question of the author's language is the heavy reliance of the novel on data from the oral tradition. The book seems to tell us what Macondo and especially the Buendias know about themselves. Partly what

might be called "objective facts" but mostly rumors, legends, curses, pious lies, exaggerations and fables that nobody has written, which old people have told to the young, which women have whispered to the priest, which lovers and witches have moaned in the dead of night, which snake-oil pitchmen have shouted in the public square.

The relation of this past of Macondo from its oral tradition reveals as clearly as can be that the documented official history, if there could be such a thing for a place like Macondo, is no where nearly enough. History is that, of course, but it is also all the good and evil people have dreamed and cooked up for their own preservation and in the end as a contribution toward their own destruction.

I read this book in part as a bitter attack upon -- or better a declaration of independence from -- the oppressive history of the bare fact. As an insistence on a living past, a fecund past of risks taken, mistakes made and of joys and miseries actually experienced.

The second way in which 100 anos seems to me to be of use to students of Latin American history is that, leaving aside the specific events which appear to be actual events from the history of Colombia -- the massacre at the train station, the long-lasting Civil War -- the book is full of situations which are quintessentially Latin American. The question is not that Macondo is an "accurate picture" of Latin America. Macondo is no place in general and everywhere in particular, and it is a figment of Garcia Marquez' imagination. But it is also a place in which Latin Americans (not to mention other people) find great pieces of ourselves and our friends and relatives and which makes us laugh and cry at ourselves.

Many things true of Macondo are true of the Latin American continent. Such as the Rabelaisian excesses in times of prosperity; the generally relaxed relationship with the Church; the importance of the family unit as the main focus of life, surviving many generations; the non-proprietary relationship of people with what we call "progress" -- the fact that ice or movies or railroads can be brought without seeming as if in any way they belong to people. Latin America is a world in which science and technology have not seemed the essential features of life that they have seemed to be here, nor have they transformed social relations to the degree they have here, nor have they appeared to be the achievement and the property of a mighty national intelligence as they have been made to appear here. They have had some considerable impact, but they have been alien and esoteric affairs introduced from afar, cultivated by small groups, never explained to the people or put to their service, and so associated by them with magic and with commercial gimcrackery. They have been peripheral to the main streams of life and even of social change. The overwhelming influence of climate and the physical environtment (here better treated than in a lot of fiction -- we're in the tropics, but rather than faced with inexorable multicolored exuberant nature, we're in a barren, trivial, colorless, arid, shopworn, dusty, intolerable hot little town).

The novel seems to me to be useful to history students, therefore, because it can go a very long way toward putting us into a Latin American ambience and familiarizing us with situations more characteristic of general Latin American experience than to our own.

It may be that the main general characteristic of Latin American society present in the books is the solitude itself, seen by Garcia Marquez as part and parcel of the fantastic nature of reality. This is the solitude that is

characteristic of the time of great deeds and rapacious exploitations which followed on the primitive time of communalism and balance with nature, the solitude of the reign of the dog-eat-dog system, which will last until the far-future time of the true communism, when community is restored and put back into balance with nature. That irreduceable solitude, sometimes seeming in our era as if it were the permanent human condition, which teaches the wise that only in the abandonment of useless struggles lies peace. Anglo-Americans have been relatively more successful, or more stubborn, in trying to convince ourselves that that solitutde was done with or non-existent. But she who wishes to understand the difficulty of revolution and of any other accelerations of social change on a participatory basis in Latin America, will do well to try to understand this notion of solitude, and even of the futility of struggle, which is built into a regime of economic, social and political repression. When struggles are waged in Latin America, it is because that attitude has at least temporarily been overcome.

But Garcia Marquez is healthy, robust and cheerful in the midst of the solitude in which all of us now live. He laughs at it rather than bewailing it, which is what Latin America seems to me to do, and saves us from pessimism by affirming the grandioseness, the fecundity and the vitality of our human kind, even on the eve of what may be its tragic (or not so tragic) end.

I've referred so far to how the story is told, and of what I think there is in it that is an expression of general Latin American reality. The novel is also most useful to history students and readers of newspapers, as a lesson in perspective. The perspective it adopts is in some senses what I call a "peoples history" perspective. The main characters in l00 Years of Solitude are not peasants or workers, but members of a kind of country bourgeoisie -- small-

time cattle ranchers, local entrepreneurs, operators of a casa de huespedes. But the perspective from which the story is told is very much theirs. This has a number of interesting effects on the way the story is told, which are worth mentioning in this context.

One is that the population of a dusty little country town, which to a traveller or visiting government official would seem drearily undistinguishable -- people all dressed in the same clothing, living in houses looking just alike, shuffling around the dusty town square -- turn out to be incredibly diverse and complex personalities full of outragious lusts and fantasies, capable of great wisdom and great folly. Personalities no less interesting than queens and generals and philosophers, of no less parts, no less real, with pretentions no less ridiculous. By the same token, everyday events and country town affairs are revealed as engrossing and complex, amusing and terrifying.

Another result of the novel's perspective shift is the astonishing view we get of the great events of the civil war, and of politics in the nation's capital. They are referred to with all due respect for their importance. At one point we even get a full outline of current events, like you might get on a TV news show, which does nothing at all to help us understand what is going on: (read on pp. 140-141)

The book leaves us with a very clear sense, and I would say a sense which is entirely accurate historically, of the unreality of great events in the lives of people. One can imagine that for the ancestors of the people of Macondo the achievement of independence from Spain was an event of little consequence; World War II and the atomic bomb must scarcely have caused rumors. Presidents and kings were figments of imagination, and even if their activities brought some great event or even cataclysm to the town, it was

quickly lost in the realm of legend. What this amounts to in historical practice is a tragic failure to understand how their lives fit into the broader experience of the nation and the world. In that situation the myths and lies multiply, nourished by the official press, keeping people passive and even content in the assumption that they have no part in the process of the world. "En Macondo no ha pasado nada, ni está pasando, ni pasará nunca. Este es un pueblo feliz." (p. 263).

One of the book's other great achievements is that it pays full attention to women and their role in the world -- to their sexual powers over men, to their relatively great practicality and intelligence in relation to that of men, and to their indispensable role in holding things together. There are wise women and foolish women, sensuous women and celibate, strong and weak. But none of the women in this book can be disregarded, as the history books of every country have until recently disregarded them almost without exception.

The novel contains at least one other kind of lesson for history students -- one which I have found harder to deal with than the others. Garcia Marquez does something very curious with reality in this book. In the first place, he weaves in and out of it with pure fantasy until we are hard put to distinguish which is which. Then he does this while relating what looks like a pretty straightforward chronology of a family from utopia through great events and increasing solitude to annihilation (which might be a fable of the history of all America). But at the end, he reveals that the whole story has been prophesized by one of its own characters, and in fact only exists because it was written down by Melquiades and will end when the family, who have

been reading the story along with us, get to the end. So the whole thing is not history after all, but myth, or both. History and myth. What happened and what might have happened or even should have happened, mixed into one.

Which, if we think about it and are candid with ourselves, is what happens with our own telling of experiences -- and which is a more real reality than the monolithic reality of what we usually call (with a certain disdain which reveals our alienation from them) the bare facts. Every historical act of the Buendias in Macondo contains all the possibilities that are usually ignored by a chronicle of events -- the dreams, the fears, the madnesses, the imaginations of the real people who have been the actors of all history. Garcia Marquez puts them there with those possibilities by virtue of his art, and of his faithfulness to the truth of human experience. It seems to me that by doing this he challenges us as readers to endow the characters in our newspapers and history books with these dimensions, freeing them of the mere "facts" which help us to find them, but which bind them about and hide them from us.

Garcia Marquez gives us a lesson in the vitality of all human experience -- even the experience of dusty country towns in tropical places -- and also at the same time a lesson in how human experience is not to be taken too seriously. We all know from experience that real life is seldom of epic proportions, or very straightforward, or very purposeful -- that it is not quite as we are led to believe by history books that it is or ought to be. Life is mostly freaky, frustrating, futile and fun -- or it's so heavy that we fail to notice its distinguishing characteristics. It's over quickly. It's never what it

could be. Folly is a much bigger part of it than fruitfulness. Fantasy is a part of reality.

But when we turn to books, especially history books, we expect to find serious stuff -- the plain, unadulterated, objective, maybe even definitive, truth. Well, Garcia Marquez tells us the truth. He tells us 1,000 truths, some of them as true as they can be. He tells them ardently, in great detail, and with his tongue in both cheeks. Then he does us the great service of reminding us that he is not to be taken seriously, or at face value, at all. Not at all.

Think about that. A book full of truth and enlightenment and fun which is not to be taken seriously. Not to be memorized, or cited as a reference. But worth reading several times over, and talking to your friends about. Think what a world we'd have if people had always read their Bibles, Torahs & Korans in that spirit. Read their newspapers in it, and their constitutions. If they'd listened in that spirit to their national anthems. In the spirit of Sholem Aleichem, of Geoffrey Chaucer, of Mark Twain, of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

[story of shipmate Sergio and how I was taking him seriously and working up theories on Latin working-class sexuality vs. American]

Perhaps a word ought to be said about the comparison between this novel and other novels about ordinary people -- novels full of folkloric description, and with vivid descriptions of suffering and violent condemnations of oppression like Jorge Icaza's Huasipungo. Such books make human suffering out to be something monolithic and remote in space and time, something definable which one can be against while not really understanding it.

But Garcia Marquez turns all into beauty and humor, and by doing so reveals that oppression is not a remote thing caused by a remote oppressor,

but something that is with us here and now. It is not the result of inexorable fate. People have not been subjected to it by an all-powerful outside agent. What misery we suffer we have in some measure brought upon ourselves. We do not of course deserve it; and we can do something about it. But it is important to understand that we have also not been passive victims of its coming upon us. We have been actors in the process that has brought us to this pass. Oppression, then, is not an abstraction; it is something that operates in constant interaction with our own daily struggles and our weaknesses and ourt imaginary representations of reality. In this way, it seems to me, all of humanity's suffering from oppression is brought home by García Márquez; and it is mixed up with the other elements of our everyday life so that it can be seen as the real thing it is for everyone, and therefore can be understood and struggled against by anyone. This same characteristic of the novel has led some left -wing critics to conclude that for all of his unquestionable literary skill, García Márquez is no more than a bourgeois writer trying to delight the comfortable and reassure them that the poverty of most people is no problem for the privileged few. In this connection, it is worth pointing out to North American readers that Gabriel García Márquez has always thought of himself as a socialist, and that he has been active in support of the struggle for socialism in his own country and abroad.

It is perhaps because of the author's vital human involvement with both the oppressor and the oppressed that García Márquez' Macondo, like Latin America itself, is not a society of rebels. Rather it is a resentful little town, a place like the United States today in many respects, poisoned by resentments which seldom manifest themselves in any exemplary explosion, but rather hide away and emerge only in small, sporadic outbursts. In some social fiction, revolutionary violence appears certain, and sure to succeed, and likely

to produce a new social order. In 100 Years of Solitude it is shown to be futile, unless it can be preceded by some genuine political re-education of the majority of the people. This is because a people ignorant of its own history, and ignorant of the political and economic contexts of its own present experience, is doomed to repeat its mistakes time and time again until it destroys itself.

This, as I read it, is an urgent call for the production and distribution of a people's history and a people's social science, to help build our people's and every people's consciousness of the power the people, of any people, to make its own history. In the absence of a general re-education in the light of such a history and social science, it can seem that we are helpless. A war fought for no good reason, or an outrageous massacre of peaceful striking workers, or any other governmental violation of the public trust will be forgotten out of laziness or cowardliness, by a people so distracted and defused as to reject the news that affects them most, and to ignore the lessons of their own lives for the lives of their children. In those circumstances, political protest can hardly be more effective than that of the old Coronel Aureliano Buendia, tied to a tree, muttering "one of these days I'm going to arm my men so that we can wipe out these gringos de mierda."