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Introduction

Jay Corwin¹

This collection of essays about García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has its origins in a conversation I had had several years ago with a great friend named Eric Skipper, a professor whose love of literature is all consuming. He had asked me if I might contribute an essay to a collection he had planned for Rodopi Press's *Dialogue Series* on another Latin American novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*. While I was preparing the essay I had asked him about whether he thought the editor might be interested in a collection on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Several days later I was put in touch with Michael J. Meyer, the *Dialogue Series* editor, who was not just helpful but a real champion of the cause and we began immediately with a call for papers. Mike had an unlimited vision of the range of possibilities. Not long afterwards and out of the blue I had received a request from the editors of *The Literary Encyclopedia* to write entries on *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* for their vastly expanding internet project. They had been given my name by Mike, who had written their entries on Steinbeck. At the time I had asked the editors of *Theory in Action* about whether they had ever considered a purely literary edition. John and Ali were not just receptive to the idea but placed the project in my hands. These two projects were inextricably tied to one another. For that special edition I had asked Mike Meyer, a renowned specialist on the works of Steinbeck, if he could contribute a piece. We were both playing editor to one another's works but I always understood that Professor Meyer was the seasoned scholar and I never overstepped my bounds. He contributed a piece to the *Theory in Action* edition on Steinbeck's *Winter of our Discontent*. It was lengthy and sometimes subjective and as he himself had mentioned, he was too close to his subject to remain detached. The

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piece had been rejected by another journal and so I set about the task of hacking, cutting, reorganizing, and always with kid gloves. I saw in that piece Mike's great love for Steinbeck, and also the blindness of love that overshadowed what I found to be ideas that were both impressive and seductive. Performing plastic surgery on Mike's essay was difficult because the patient was awake through each incision. I wanted to see that piece in print because Mike had given it to me as a test of my editing skills and I understood as the perennial student that I had to pass it.

Meanwhile through these projects I had become aware of other scholars whose work I had not been aware of: Chris Schulenburg, Rodica Grigore, and Adelaida López. Chris wrote a beautiful, playful, inspiring essay that was included in the first literary edition of *Theory in Action*, three years ago. I wanted to know if he could write one for the *One Hundred Years* collection. He agreed and subsequently gave me an essay that required so little editing (a comma, a missing apostrophe, an unnecessary apostrophe) that it was difficult to catch those minor typos. His prose is beautiful and his ideas are new, a combination that makes for good reading. Adelaida Lopez had responded to the call for papers with an essay that had been difficult and even painful for her to write, with some basic truths about *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that no other scholar has dared touch: the treatment of Black women in the novel. Adelaida's ideas are overwhelming in a literal sense. I found it difficult to read because of the intensity of the topic. I could sense a fear of those ideas in the first draft of the essay and I knew that it could reflect rejection or even hostility to those ideas and that the best way to proceed was, as in Mike's case, through a bit of cosmetic surgery. I still find it difficult to read Adelaida's essay because her ideas are powerful, authentic, realistic, completely new, and in total defiance to the genteel and sometimes too-prissy treatment of racism in García Márquez's works. I am in awe and humbled by Adelaida's incisive and earth moving scholarship, and very grateful to have been able to work with her on this project. I know the novel very well, and the scholarship on it, and that in the hundreds of essays published on this one novel that not a single one touches the wound that Adelaida opens fully and lays bare for the readership. This is the mark of a serious scholar who will change the way this novel is viewed, read, and understood. It is therefore fitting that it should appear in *Theory in Action*, whose underlying philosophy is to publish where weaker souls dare not tread. Rodica Grigore is a classically trained scholar whose essay on one of my favorite novels, Shusako Endo's *Silence*, drew me to ask her for her take on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Her assessments are meditative, thoroughly

researched, and engaging. When reading her essays one understands implicitly that Rodica is a major scholar.

Among the other essays I have included one of my own which appears as a reprint thanks to *Confluencia*. I could see no other way to publish in this collection a piece of my own without it having gone through the rigors of blind peer review. It is my reading of the novel based on my years of research on the Indigenous myths I once uncovered in it. It is suitably contrasted with other takes on the novel presented in this collection. One will see the same quotes taken from the novel in several of the essays, each with a well-founded presentation of its meaning, or meanings.

Among my favorites in this collection are those I have received from Jonathon (Jono) Ryan and William Deaver. Jono brings to the table an examination of the novel that is an examination of theories of language and communication that come unhindered by side-tracking literary views. It is fresh, new, solid scholarship that allows the reader of the novel to see its use of language in a completely new way. As for William Deaver's essay I can only say that it is monumental. Like Rodica Grigore, Bill is a top notch, heavyweight champ of a scholar. For many years I have told him, after reading one essay of his after another, that he has a killer left hook. To date I think this may be his best essay. I was bowled over by his use of language and the discoveries he has made in this work on the use of alchemy. His research is deep, thorough and the conclusions he draws are unshakeable.

A year and a half ago this collection had reached a critical point: would-be contributors who had promised, stalled and eventually dropped out of contact, had left this collection bereft of the possibility of paired "dialogues." I had waited in vain. I had waited for months for one well-known scholar to give me an essay, and in the end he simply stopped communicating.

I wrote to Mike to tell him of the serious impasse. I had not heard from him in several months and was both fearful of disappointing him and hoping he had not dropped the project because of missed deadlines. Instead of receiving Mike's forgiveness and his usual chuckling or grumbling, I found a reply written by his son to inform me that Mike had died two months before. There was an unbearable sadness in that short letter which told me, even through the haze of this loss, that this collection would not see the light of day. I mentioned this in passing to Ali who, as always generous, understanding, kind and patient, suggested that the essays could be used in a special edition of *Theory in Action*.

Jay Corwin

As always I am grateful to Ali and John for offering to publish these essays as a single collection. Before he died, Mike had managed to finish editing collections on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and one of his favorite novels, *East of Eden*. With those things in mind I would like to express my gratitude to the contributors for their essays and their patience in waiting to see them in print. This collection is the work of many people, including Eric Skipper and the late Michael J. Meyer, and especially Ali Shehzad Zaidi, who has the same generous nature, kindness and patience as Mike, but without the loveable crotchety grumbling and the giddiness I discovered in Mike that sometimes bled into his essays.

ABOUT THE NOVEL

One Hundred Years of Solitude (*Cien años de soledad*, 1967) is one of the most popular novels of the 20th century. It has been read, examined and commented upon by many of the world's literary figures and critics. Over the past forty-five years it has retained its status of a serious novel and a cult novel. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Jorge Luis Borges, Milan Kundera, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa have all commented on it in essays. It is sometimes referred to as the *Don Quixote* of Latin America, and finds its place on popular lists of the "100 best" novels of the Twentieth Century. It has been examined and re-examined by the top scholars of Latin American literature: Julio Ortega, Ricardo Gullón, Gordon Brotherston, Roberto González Echevarría, and Josefina Ludmer, amongst others. North American critics such as Harold Bloom have ventured to comment on it as well, via the translation into English by Gregory Rabassa, whose graduate class I attended many years ago with my fellow student, Ali Shehzad Zaidi. That novel was on our reading list. It is the subject of this collaboration and indirectly what brought us together twenty-five years ago. This novel was the subject of my doctoral dissertation at Florida State University, about which I must have spoken endlessly to my fellow grad student, William Ormond Deaver, whose work on that novel appears in this collection. Unbeknownst to me, Professors Deaver and Zaidi had also known each other independently of me through graduate studies elsewhere in Latin American literature. In our field it is omnipresent, and all consuming, demands to be read and re-read.

The novel relates through several layers of mythology the foundation of a town in Colombia, Macondo, which starts as a dream in the mind of one of the main characters (Jose Arcadio Buendía). The title of the novel is illusive: in Spanish "soledad" means loneliness, but it is also used as a

Christian name as well as a place name. Rabassa's rendition of it into English as "Solitude" is more than adequate because it retains the rhythmic beauty of the title. On the other hand, like most translations, it strips the title of its underlying meanings. As noted in my own essay included in this collection, it may refer to an old town in Colombia named Soledad that has since been swallowed by the larger city of Barranquilla, which, according to accounts by his friends and personal recollections of the author, is the basis for the town of Macondo on its final decline.

The characters as noted begin in an age of mythology and end similarly, but not before major incursions of history, such as the Banana Massacre of 1928, and the endless wars that have plagued Colombia, waged between liberals and conservatives. The novel traces the Buendía family from their origins in Rio Hacha on the Guajiro peninsula in Colombia, to the mythological town which the family founds on the banks of a river, near an endless swamp. Macondo is as a central figure in the novel as any character. It has long been compared to Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County by critics eager to credit Faulkner with trailblazing Latin American fiction. Whether credit is due to him or not is debatable, but to be certain there is a large, cultish following of the Faulknerian connection. Bloom for example has suggested that the voices of Faulkner and Virginia Woolf can be heard (as well as those of James Joyce and Joseph Conrad) in the novel, although I have neither heard their voices nor do I see any similarities between the prose styles of the Anglo-modernist school and the vividly Latin American García Márquez. But then reading the work in Spanish is not the same as reading it in English, and yields a different picture. On this point in particular, Chris Schulenburg and I, independently of one another, have considered there to be a much deeper, clearer connection between García Márquez's prose and that of his literary Brazilian forefather, Jorge Amado. Although we come to those points in different essays and along different roads and via stylistic and theoretical extremes, there are at least two critics till now who view *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as having its roots firmly in Latin America.

García Márquez was a relatively unknown, minor writer at the time of the publication of his magnum opus in 1967. Without having expected it, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* took the literary world by storm and was an instant and continuing success. Its lyricism and humor temper its serious and tragic moments, and without a heaviness of tone or unbearably baroque language it lends itself to popular reading for those who love escapism and seek no special hidden undercurrents in it. That it

has been popular both with general readers and critics has anchored its reputation. It is still well loved by the 20ish crowds of students and rebellious intellectual types much as Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* was to the 60s generation of radical American bikers and cultural iconoclasts.

One Hundred Years of Solitude begins with the enthusiasm of the youthful founders of Macondo, fleeing from an honor killing which remains on their consciences till the ends of their days, their meeting of a Gypsy Guru named Melquíades, and is peppered with stretches of the imagination and infusions of the mythological into everyday reality. The Buendía's family generations are followed until the very end of their line, a child born of incest that dies of neglect and is devoured by ants, and the narrator's contention that it was the only child in the history of that family born of real love, and that the generations condemned to one hundred years of loneliness have no second opportunity. This coincides with that child's father who deciphers Melquíades' manuscripts a century after their composition. Ghosts walk through the family home from the start of the novel to the finish. There is murder, incest, prostitution, homosexuality, masturbation and bestiality among the characters, as well as religious hypocrisy and sanctimony, pride, vanity, gluttony, lust, greed, envy, and an obsession with gold.

That the novel has no clear, obvious philosophy it seeks to illustrate makes the ending seem cryptic. How one reads this novel then becomes individualistic to an extreme. My personal extreme has been to trace the mythological content of the novel to the Indigenous origins of Latin America. That has provided me with satisfaction that the ending of the novel has a particular meaning, and that the novel itself is a criticism of what I have called (mainly internally) the American disease. The characters in the novel forget their gods, their origins and in the end are caricatures of Europeans, as all of us are when we deny our unique identity and Europeanize or westernize ourselves out of existence. The not so subtle critique of Amaranta Ursula with her Belgian husband and her Isadora Duncan length scarf or the last Jose Arcadio, who has returned from his life of debauchery in Rome only for the share of his inheritance, befits the picture we have all seen anywhere in the Americas, of the Henry James or T.S. Eliot type, or of many much lesser and not so literary figures, who race across the Atlantic to live out the fantasy about European Culture that exists only in the minds of people in the Americas who have long been taught that we are inferior creatures, of a lesser culture and civilization. This is more painful a reality for Latin Americans and persons of mixed origins in the North, we who cannot unmake our unmistakably indigenous features to follow that fantasy. No

novel has rebuffed that tendency toward self-annihilation more than *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

However, as stated, it is for each reader to come to his or her own conclusion about the meaning of the novel. No single reading of it has unveiled all its hidden qualities, including those hidden in plain sight. What this collection offers is what I have expressed above: individual views about its origins, its depths, its meanings, and the author's technical prowess. Above and beyond all else, these pieces are vastly different to one another in style and content, and I am more than certain this collection is unlike any other, in that it has allowed the most overt and radical thoughts to emerge. I wish to thank Ali Shehzad Zaidi, and the contributors: Christ Schulenburg, Jonathan Ryan, Adelaida Lopez, Rodica Grigore, and William Ormond Deaver. Many thanks.