

Magical Realism: Mosaic of Excess

To refer to a literary work as a mosaic does not necessarily set it apart from other works. To claim that it engages in excess, in whatever sense or form, likewise does not distinguish it as bearing a distinctly unique quality or afford it exclusivity. But can one say that any work of literature is not unique, on the one hand, or that it is, on the other? Paradoxical though it may appear, each literary work is of course unique, is *sui generis* unto itself; there is no other quite like it. Each novel expresses what it has to say, and tells its story, in its own unique way. Yet, every novel partakes of a particular form, or genre, which, although not well defined is immediately recognizable. By partaking, or being representative, of a given genre a work relinquishes in a sense certain claims to being unique. In this sense all novels embrace shared characteristics — a detailed story that includes plot and subplot, extensive temporal features, perhaps similarly expansive spatial aspects, numerous characters, a multiplicity of events — which, whether we can cite them all or not, does not detract from the novel being a novel.

Numerous novels may appear a mosaic made of words, or exhibit a mosaic-like structure, defined by the numerous tales incorporated, and perhaps somehow framed, within the overall structure. *The Golden Ass*, for instance, seems such because of the proliferation of tales within the greater tale that Apuleius has to tell. *The Brothers Karamazov*, composed centuries later, is structured similarly with its varied collection of storytellers, each of whose encapsulated narratives is meant to reflect dramatically and ideationally upon others and ultimately upon Dostoevsky's greater narrative. A similar case may be made for numerous works composed in different times and places. What should be immediately apparent, however, is that the underlying notion of the novel (whether a seeming mosaic or not), is both fluid and fixed. We know one when we see one, because it shares certain trans-temporal, trans-national, readily identifiable characteristics. Yet we also know that new novels with their own highly distinctive features, such as *Ulysses*, emerge periodically, even if

they are not as brilliantly innovative or on the same artistic level as Joyce's creation.

Having spawned a whole host of admirers, and having inspired a new generation of writers of Latin American literature, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* is such an influential work. Moreover, and more to the point for our purposes, this remarkable novel — which contributes to making the novel novel — represents a stunning instance of a literary mosaic. To make the point briefly, and to anticipate summatively, Rulfo's great work offers a temporal latticework arranged upon or within a spatial patterning that extends above and below ground, as the living (should there be any such in Rulfo's wondrous text) engage dialogically with the dead, who are themselves equally vitally — if not more so, in this paradoxical place called Mexico — engaged in feverish talk among themselves, in a startling mesh of voices, cries, moanings, and murmurings. Within the inanimate (or less animate?) persistent sense of wind and rain, pounding and hammering, there is an equally demanding need to be heard among all else as well: the living and the dead, the sounds of horses and dogs, of echoes ricocheting off stones and walls, of rain and water, dust and drought, nature and culture. All seek their say; all wail and bewail their unalterable plight — of existing, of being, of human being.

Felicitously figured by Blake in his famous dictum, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," the term *excess*, like *mosaic*, is common and perfuse, and may also be applied to numerous novels. In Apuleius' tale a man is transformed into an ass — one, however, with the mind of a man. The tale tells of all he endures as a presumed dumb animal — from the perspective of an intelligent enough human being. Does not this ancient comic work indulge in a certain imaginative excess? If the novel is designed to express a sense of daily life at a particular time and place, does *The Golden Ass* square with that rather benign understanding? If not, it would appear that on some critical level college professors have long been braying up the wrong tree. In terms of excess and the nineteenth-century Russian novel, it is commonly said that western readers read Dostoevsky, in particular, precisely because of the appeal of that peculiarly Russian brand of excess, in contrast to their own relatively restrained ways and mores. In this light what is normal to a Russian may appear appealingly outrageous to an urbane western reader in the comfort of his own well-ordered, personal library, matched, perhaps, by a well-ordered personal life. While the novel itself is expected to be well wrought, carefully structured (whether its peculiar order is entirely apparent to reader or critic, or not), perhaps magical realism, the subject of the present inquiry, similarly

holds a certain appeal for its readers akin to that of Russian literature for the prototypical western reader. Do not magical realist works exude an aura of excess — of seemingly disordered order, of a periodic intrusion of chaotic event, of disorganization within a highly organized, carefully structured verbal composition — that lends those works a share at least of their special appeal? The aim of this study is to explore such questions within the comparative context of two Latin American novels, Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. The two share a number of features in common. Temporally, each novel lasts the length of a life. Spatially, each takes its reader through a labyrinthian maze. As a related case in point, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* takes place in Mexico on a single day, the Day of the Dead (the one day in the year, "when the dead are permitted to live"). Comala, the town in Rulfo's book, is analogously symbolic of an entire country, while also representing a symbolic space of the dead. Essentially the same may be said of *Autumn of the Patriarch*, as the generic Latin American dictator rules over, and lays waste to, an undesignated dead zone of his own. Each work is contained within the bounds of a man's domain, within which untold women are bound to suffer (literally) at the man's hands. Both books are permeated with sin and sex. But sex is not the sin. Causing mindless, needless hurt is at issue; being hurtful is sinful. Both Pedro Páramo and the general are governed by a single, all-consuming passion: the will to power — how to get it, how to keep it. In the absence of any moral precept, both operate according to the same maxim: get it and keep it, no matter the cost — which is inevitably measured in human life, with no one ever called to account. "What law?.. From now on we're the law," says Pedro Páramo (40). "I am the king and the law is my thing," declares the general (162). Both novels have at their center a man, around whom an entire realm revolves, according to whose will and whim that domain is maintained. Both afford an anatomy of will that is subject only to the character's own moral and physical deterioration, as he is depicted as morally rotting before the reader's eyes. ("Only he remained, alone, like a sturdy tree beginning to rot inside.. He was used to seeing some part of him die every day" [PP108,123]). Yet, even as the fiction fixes on the fate of a single individual, its focus is concentrated upon an entire country — Mexico and somewhere, all too familiar, in Latin America — where an analogous deterioration and decay on a much larger social scale is very much at stake, "in a land in which everything grows ... but everything that grows is bitter. That is our curse" (PP 72), one that extends to both books. Driven by greed, lust, and the hunger for power, the hero and his

fragmented, fractured story contain in embryo the story of Mexico and that of Garcia Marquez' unnamed Caribbean country — their destitution and dissolution, their great need to be regenerated, in the midst of listlessness and hopelessness, to be revived in a way that bears dignity and possibility rather than an oppressive sense of death and decay. Both books seek to exorcise the demonic in the desolate hope of replacing it with the beatific, to exchange anti-spirit for spirit, death for life, for more life, in the stark absence of light, whereby overwhelming darkness affords a certain excess of its own.

After so many years of never lifting up my head, I forgot about the sky. And even if I had looked up, what good would it have done? The sky is so high and my eyes so clouded that I was happy just knowing where the ground was. (PP 65-66)

This world presses in on us from every side; it scatters fistfuls of our dust across the land and takes bits and pieces of us as if to water the earth with our blood. What did we do? Why have our souls rotted away? (PP 84)

In this essay I intend to discuss magical realism, with the aim to offer a fledgling poetics in the process, yet acknowledge from the outset that *Pedro Páramo* does not itself appear a pristine instance. Although it is a commonly acknowledged predecessor of that mode of creative activity that has, in the second half of the previous century, blessed the Latin American novel especially. Features of Latin American magical realism that I have cited elsewhere (*The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*) include, among others:

reenacting in a heightened, more conscious fashion the role of the child in perceiving the world and everything in it as remarkable and new; superimposing one perceived reality upon another, as seemingly fantastic events, which may appear as an indubitable norm to those belonging to the place, are embedded within what outsiders perceive as distinct, exclusive, and the only "true" reality; accounting for events and possibilities that are immanent, even uniquely inherent, to the southern hemisphere of the Americas, where the intrusion of the jungle into city life is an ever-present threat; where the mix of different peoples, with their various myths and beliefs, fomenting like intrusions into the business of daily life, results in remarkable blendings and certain tensions; and where those tensions are manifested in perpetual political conflict. (70-71)

Further:

Magical realist texts derive from a host of Latin American realities. Among the more apparent sources are an imposing geography, composed of daunting natural barriers — impenetrable forests, dangerous waters, and portentous heights — and a frequently unbearable humid Caribbean atmosphere that inevitably dampens the spirits. The geographical proximity of the jungle to the city elicits a related omnipresent sense of the closeness of the prehistoric past to modern life, of myth, or primordial thinking, to scientific thought. Yet that closeness, filtered through a creative human imagination nurtured on a mix of the traditions and beliefs of the native Indians, as well as those of the transplanted Africans and Europeans absorbed into that world of prolific cultural hybridization, allows for a seemingly inevitable portrayal of the fantastic as factual and realistic. (71)

All such significant designations may play only a minimal role in *Pedro Páramo*, yet, as shown, there are striking similarities between the two novels, whereby a comparative study is meant here to offer understandings, in their totality, that go beyond either and both in revealing salient aspects belonging to magical realism.

My argument, in brief, is that if one were to conceive a mosaic of excess, an abstract and theoretical grid, meant to model the making of magical realist texts, one could chart and place numerous works designated as such within that grid. Of course, all efforts at constructing such a poetics emerge as abstract constructs theoretically juxtaposed to concrete literary works. Otherwise put, there is a distinct difference between model and novel, residing in that between figural and literal. For while the work itself is, in relation to reality, metaphorical, a figurative array of words and things, it is nonetheless real and concrete in relation to abstract theory. On the other hand the theory or model, designed to figure or configure a notion such as magical realism, is abstract and figurative not only in relation to reality but also to the works it is designed to model (or "contain") as well. In other words, the work exists; it is something tangible and palpable. A model is neither, and does not exist — except in the sense of being an imaginary, perhaps even imaginative, hermeneutic device. Yet beyond the device, or within the grid, is the very concept itself, in this case, of magical realism. And in treating that concept, perhaps it is not so much a question of *magic or real or magically real* that should be explored or examined — in the relatively concrete sense of a literary work rather than a literary model. For, if we look elsewhere than at these terms,

vexed as they are and tossed about as they have been for decades and more, the question may be reasonably reduced to that of the reader's reception and, equally important, perception — in this broad instance — of possible excess, of a perceived extreme that must either be accepted or rejected as part of the reader's suspension of disbelief, which, otherwise put, means the reader's willingness to accept what is presented as either plot, story, or the events that compose the one and the other. Can a heartless *patron*, for instance, have indeed given his heart long ago to a former childhood friend, now an *otherworldly* woman, "a woman who is not of this world" (PP 108)? Can a heartless, loveless, unloved dictator give his heart at all? Can one resolve such apparent paradoxes by taking refuge in a literary term that has come to mean just about anything and everything one might want it to mean and, therefore, perhaps nothing at all? Literary terms, after all, are only useful when we can say with certainty that they mean something, judiciously and conclusively, that is neither indiscriminate nor illegitimate — a consideration that encompasses our challenge here.

If *Pedro Páramo* may be aptly described as being structured on the model of a mosaic, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is likewise a masterful mosaic, composed, among other things, of a complex atemporal ordering in apparent disorder; of outlandish (magically real) detail coupled with ostensible historical "fact"; of a changing, fluid perspective, comprised of elusive, eliding shifters whose referents are never the same. (Hence the narrator at any given moment may be a man, woman, child, whore, child whore.) In addition, it offers a stunning exemplar of a particular Latin American excess. The "patriarch" of the tide, generic dictator of an equally generic Caribbean country, is, after all, excessively untutored, cruel, lucky, long lived, prolific in making children, wars, and widows. He has lost count of his many years, his offspring, his victims — dispatched both wittingly and not, without reason or cause, without sorrow or remorse. He is the banal, bathetic Latin American dictator, autocratic ruler for life, just as Pedro Páramo is the common patrón with self-bestowed autocratic power over *his* land. One rules over a country as though it were his private patrimony; the other rules over his patrimony as though it were a private country, set apart from law, legality, or any commonly accepted propriety. In both works, in which there is a powerful sense of first person juxtaposed, or simply opposed, to second person, we get the clear and evident sense that I matter, you do not. *I* have the power, *not you*. *I* am first and *you* are not even a distant second. Therefore, *you* are subservient, a veritable servant, and *I* am in control of the land, the country, *of you*, your wife, your daughter.

For in both works all available women, which means all women, are subjected to the will of a single man, who, in the absence of heart is will, all will, bent on evil. In one the general satisfies his needs on the bodies of women, whose names he does not know. In the other Pedro Paramo, arguably, knows whom he has under him, but has no greater feeling for them. The first thing that we hear about him is that he is "living bile" (6); and later, that he is "unmitigated evil" (84), qualities that have nothing to do with life and everything to do with death — of which the same can be said of Garcia Marquez' lusterless lout, who, like his literary predecessor, is death oriented, also born of thanatos and, therefore, remains forever far removed from eros, no matter the endless supply of available women nor the prodigious progeny belonging to either cruel ruler.

In *Pedro Paramo* a poetics of excess is manifested in forms of hyperbole and paradox, the latter at times edging into oxymoron. In virtually any given passage one or another of these find their place *in extremis* in Rulfo's great extremity. There is an excess of both deluge and drought in that place of "pure, airless heat" (5), of "stagnant air" (83), in that town that "sits on the coals of the earth, at the very mouth of hell" (6). Yet one can still "hear the drumming of the rain" (61), "the rain's really coming down" (62), "water kept pouring down, streaming in diluvial burbling" (89). Paradoxically, we are told that "the valley of Comala was drowning in rain" (91) — that dry, airless place, "cursed, suffocated in misfortune" (83). Where women wail (wrongly) at the death of Miguel Paramo (68), whose father (rightly) does not mourn him, but where mockingbirds are also capable of wailing "a heartrending wail" (62). And where another father bemoans a daughter, a widow, whom he berates for "still living with your husband" (84). This is a place of moaning — "She's moaning. Just moaning" (80) — and murmuring, of "laughter that sounds used up," of voices "worn away by the years" (41) that sound like echoes of once human speech ("her voice had human overtones") and of echoes that still sound human. "I felt that the town was alive. And that if I heard only silence, it was because I was not yet accustomed to silence — maybe because my head was still filled with sounds and voices" (8). Yet the reverse at times also appears true, so that a sound can be too frightful, too full of fright, for us to want it to be human. "That sounded like someone screaming, but it can't be human" (88). Yet there is a connection, after all, between the natural world and the human, as Rulfo's poetic vision makes abundantly clear, in an extraordinary instance of the pathetic fallacy that appears to draw far more upon pathos than "falsity," as the sound of nature and the human voice

intermesh, interpenetrating for the moment, and uniting in a world filled with beauty and sorrow, with meaning and emptiness.

Drops are falling— He is conscious of... the endless dripping ... spilling water onto the wet earth.... He hears the sound of the voice.... Again he hears the dripping of water falling— And weeping ... he heard the weeping ... a soft but penetrating weeping.... The woman was sobbing. (23-24)

In Rulfo's hell opposites proliferate, paradox abounds in unresolvable contradiction, in consistently impalpable shape, in forms of silence and speech, murmurs and echoes, of a horse galloping, dogs howling, a hanged man wailing, spirits swarming, and restless souls scurrying across streets aUve with nothing but the dead ("she disappeared as if she had never existed" [8]), in a town in which nothing happens but what is long past, and in which, improbably, "you may find someone who's still among the living" (9). Although, all anyone wants, it seems, is to "rest" (20), "rest in peace" (22), sleep the sleep of the dead.

"What happened to you?"

"So many things have happened that all I want to do is sleep."

"That's what we were doing,"

"Let's all sleep, then." (47)

Sleep, Homer's great benison to the living, is here enjoyed by the dead. This is a book rife with, and rich in, dichotomies, oppositions, contradictions, hallucinatory realities, and all too realistic hallucinations. A man's, cry sticks to the walls, as silence murmurs (32), while murmurs kill (58); echoes appear trapped (33), as there appear echoes of shadows (46) — yet words remain silent (47), so that, remarkably, one hears "nothing but the sound of moths working" (32). There are thus sounds everywhere amidst the silence, an endless array of disembodied voices, belonging to the dead, which themselves kill the living.

The murmuring killed me ... the pure murmuring of life ... the murmuring killed me ... when I was face to face with the murmuring, the dam burst.. the walls seemed to distill the voices, they seemed to be filtering through the cracks and crumbling mortar ... human voices ... like a buzzing in my ears.... I could still hear the murmuring of voices ... a steady sound with no words to it, like the sound of the wind ... whispering ... whispering ... buzzing ... until finally I could hear the almost soundless words "Pray for us." (58-59)

But what good would that do? Prayer? When one is in Comala? When one is already dead and gone to hell? For "death is not to be parceled out as if it were a blessing" (77), which is paradoxical, even oxymoronic, in the context, since there are no blessings to be had in this place in any form at all.

A man, presumably alive (but perhaps not *really*), sleeps with a seeming flesh and blood woman, a reasonable enough surmise, which turns out otherwise. "The heat woke me just before midnight. And the sweat. The woman's body was made of earth, layered in crusts of earth; it was crumbling, melting into a pool of mud. I felt myself swimming in the sweat streaming from her body, and I couldn't get enough air to breathe. I got out of bed. She was sleeping" (57). Of course; in this place of the dead, the dead sleep. But flesh and blood turns out to be earth and mud and sweat — enough streaming for the man to feel he is swimming. All of which is poetic, aesthetic, excessive — a poet's vision of artistic excess. Yet one that is not simply depicted or portrayed in some abstract sense, but that is, rather, received and felt as something sensuous, as the play of the elements, in this most elemental place, by one who senses, is herself irrefutably sensual and sensuous, but who is quite mad and, paradoxically, no longer quite of this world. "But what world was Susana San Juan living in?" (95), asks Pedro Paramo, a question that has no answer but implies its own negative reply.

The winds continued to blow, day after day. The winds that had brought the rain. The rain was over but the wind remained ... the wind ... wind.... Susana San Juan heard the wind.... She was lying with her arms crossed ... thinking, listening to the night noises ... bursts of restless wind.... She sees.... She hears ... she hears she senses.... She peers [as] the wind continued to blow. (91-93)

As she herself continues to sense the past, remembering the elements, recalling her former self, now lost in a world of reverie, lost in Rulfo's great paradox, being trapped in a state between life and death, being neither alive nor dead, not being at all. So that "with each effort she sank deeper into the night" (115), until she had finally reached her goal, ever so slowly, like a turtle making its way back to the sea, a sea of sighs, where "every sigh is like a drop of your life being swallowed up" (42), and the process takes a long, long time, as Susana San Juan, thinking, sensing, remembering, dying, lets go a little at a time, giving herself gradually and repeatedly to *thalassa*, the embrace of the sea, and to *thanatos*, the grip of death.

The warm sand felt so good against my body. My eyes were closed, my arms flung wide and my legs open to the breeze from the sea. The sea there before me....The sea rose and fell. "I always swim naked in the sea"... I went back. I would always go back. The sea.... I sink into it, my whole body. I give myself to its pulsing strength, to its gentle possession, holding nothing back. "I love to swim in the sea" ... the next morning I was again in the sea, purifying myself. Giving myself to the waves. (95-96)

At Susana's death the bells toll for days on end, so that the people from the surrounding countryside come to participate in what they think is carnival (fiesta) time. The deafening chiming is mistakenly taken for a time of celebration rather than mourning. In *The Autumn of the Patriarch* the periodic tolling of the bells are taken wrongly and rightly as a sign of jubilation and carnivalized celebration — wrongly, when the general turns up still alive; rightly, when he finally ends up dead. In both instances, though, there remains the ever-present possibility of the extraordinary slippage between the real and the ideal, between what is and what might be. "The same bells of jubilation that had begun celebrating his death .. went on celebrating his immortality" (37), as though the latter impossibility were as welcome as the former probability. In *Pedro Paramo*, paradoxically, the people *think* the bells signal a joyous occasion, a time for celebration. They behave in accord with the culture but counter to the facts; no one would knowingly be glad of the poor woman's death. In *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, also paradoxically, the people *know* the bells are chiming to proclaim that long-awaited death, for which there can be no greater call, no more compelling claim, to celebrate. Everyone is happy at the despot's demise. In one novel the paradox results from a misconstrual of events; in the other there is no such confusion — death, remarkably but understandably, is the cause, in this compelling case, for "the music of liberation and the rockets of jubilation" (251).

Replete with paradox and hyperbole, Garcia Marquez' novel is likewise governed by a rich poetics of excess. The presidential palace is crawling with cows and concubines, with lepers and cripples and blind men, with vultures and whores and hens. Instead of the palace being an even remotely auspicious place of governance, it is a "marketplace disaster" (12), marked by absence and excessive lack — of love ("he knew only too well that what he lacked then and had always lacked in bed was not honor but love" [246]), of law, truth, justice, decency, morality, and even a modicum of sanity. Hyperbole and paradox are repeatedly encapsulated in the deluded old tyrant's outrageous claim: "These people love me" (20), "they love me" (21), "the people are with me" (112).

Variants on one of the general's favorite (false) themes, such claims are a gross exaggeration, a bold contradiction of the facts. Excess is thus marked by absence and intensive repetition of such hallmark statements, signaling at any given moment the general's vast distance from what is designated, on the one hand, "the incessant torrent of reality" (34). So, he thunders now and again, without thought for his own mortality or others' lives: "because the way I am I don't intend to die again, God damn it, let other people die" (36), he says in a favorite refrain, an ode to life everlasting, "let other people die, God damn it" (240). But from what is referred to, on the other hand, as "the hazards of reality" (13) the general is well protected, entirely self-protected. For he was not one of those "God-damned fools [who] didn't know that in this business of men if you fall, you fall" (22). And it is all a matter of the business of men, since God — with whom "the one who can do everything" equates himself (at least with a spat upon version [110]) — does not enter into it at all, neither in the world of Pedro Paramo nor in that of the general, who tries to coerce a man of the cloth with the words: "if God is the man you say he is tell him to rid me of this ... buzzing in my ear" (23). Another favorite phrase, "what a mess ... what a bitter mess" (116-17), he says repeatedly when confronted with the results of his own acts, which are consistently far more a disaster than a mere mess, and far more excessive than he is able to see.

Offering an intended comforting remark (which might also resolve the issue of identity, but which all the same remains forever unclear), he repeatedly reassures himself, if not others, with the innocuous remark, "I'm me" (126), as though the fact alone were enough to solve all problems, resolve all issues, as though saying so might confirm the place of the one heralded as "the end of creation" (120). Closer to the mark are the linked desperate queries: "where am I that I can't find myself?" (199), "who the hell am I.. where the hell am I" (217), to which the answer, of course, is most obvious — square in the middle of "the string of atrocities of his regime of infamy" (29-30). For the book is rife with, or rich in, a peculiar mesh of mystery and misery in that "grand disorder," in which "no one knew who was who or by whom" (12), where no one "ever knew whose child was whose or by whom" (18), so that even the general "was not really sure he knew who was who, or from whom" (112) — all of which procreative unsurety leads to its own political insecurity, as the "comic tyrant" (251) helplessly declares: "I no longer know who is who, or who is with whom or against whom" (217). But the general knows from the start that his most compelling guide is the "presidential criterion that any survivor is a dangerous enemy as long as he lives," and thus operates

accordingly, in a story that might be seen as a modern day fairy tale on the one hand, with a little old man who goes to sleep every night behind the safety of "three locks, three bolts, three bars," or, more likely on the other, as a contemporary political parable, in which the necessity of politics requires the occasional massacre, with blood everywhere (58), a modest number at first of severed heads delivered in sacks (197-99), followed by far more numerous sacks and heads (216) than even the "the one who gives the orders" (63) could ever have known he had ordered, as politics generates its own peculiar poetics.

In *The Autumn of the Patriarch* perspective, too, matters as a matter of poetics. Garcia Marquez precisely details what is seen at certain moments of unguarded viewing by those granted special sight but no real insight. These prominently include a collective generically comprised of *we*, the people, in contrast to *I*, the dictator, as well as those few others, whose tale within the tale, receiving momentary focus, takes on shape and form. Hence, within the first three pages the reader is informed of what *we saw* (in precisely that phrase) a total of fifteen times. So, what did we see? In the most general terms — the magnitude of the world, reflected in a multitude of animate beings and lifeless objects. Also, "we saw him" dead (9), this (second) time (told first), really and truly dead. Throughout the book there is the reiterated sense of the profound separation between first person plural and third person singular, between *us* and *him*, between the masses, the mass of us, and the despot, whom we worship on every possible occasion but do not believe in for a moment. Yet he, too, is given the chance to register the wealth of the world, with all of its wonders; nine times we are told what *he had seen* (that one phrase likewise repeated and reiterated) on a single page (42), although he remains distinctly untouched by it all. For him there is no distinction between richness and rubble. Later, on numerous like occasions, we (as readers) are given to see much more, a whole host of things, all manner of mundane as well as extraordinary sights meshed in a marvelous mix of significant *excess* that gives rise of its own to an entire catalogue (which, by its very nature, exhibits extensive, seemingly exhaustive, hyperbolic detail [77]), composed of words denoting objects that belong to a fictive world of magical realism, which is itself comprised of such descriptive terms that are meant to suggest the richness and largesse attendant upon, and belonging to, the actual world, reflected, again, in this wondrous fictive one.

Within the great catalogues of what the people see are such entries as these:

We saw government house, immense and sad, where vultures were still entering ... we saw heroic portraits of saints and soldiers thrown to the floor among broken furniture and fresh cow flops, we saw a dining room that had been eaten up by the cows ... we saw the broad and sleeping animal that was the city ... we saw the dead craters of harsh moon ash on the endless plain where the sea had been. (8-9)

They saw ... the ephemeral backwash of a dazzling explosion and they saw nothing else to the end of time. (42)

We saw prints of bare feet stained with horse blood ... we saw the drained body of a beautiful Florentine woman in an evening gown with a saber thrust through her heart ... we saw the corpse of a little girl who looked like a toy windup ballerina with a pistol shot in her forehead ... and they saw the corpse of... the ablest and most capable of the fourteen federalist generals ... stretched out like a mullet, barefoot... with his skull pierced by a pistol shot. (235)

And from the equally lengthy catalogues of what the general sees, the following:

He had seen the tuberculosis hospital ... he had seen the infernal market of Paramaribo ... he had seen Trinidad's burning August .. he had seen Haiti's nightmare. (42)

He had seen time stopped by his orders on the abandoned streets ... he saw the closed doors ... he saw the gorged buzzards on the balconies, and he saw the dead, the dead, the dead, there were so many everywhere that it was impossible to count them .. piled up in the sun on terraces, stretched out over the vegetables in the market, flesh and blood dead people ... who knows how many, because there were many more than he would have wanted to see. (228)

The people and he *see*; in their mutual isolation, they stare in wonder at the wondrous, the marvelous, the weirdness of the world. And, in the midst of this great gulf between master and men, between violator and violated — in the wake of such horror and prevalence of death, there is yet a preponderance of life, in all its multiplicity, vitality, ubiquitous energy. If there is magic to be had in the midst of the real, then in the great disparity between the two, between eros and thanatos, is perhaps where it might best be seen. And what is seen best is life itself in all its manifestations and variations — but with a difference, as the general sees the world devoid of spirit and love, experiencing only and repeatedly "the rage of another love without love" (107), while *we see*

life in its great potential for what it is. For "the magnificent one who is more ancient than his age ... was condemned not to know life except in reverse" — and in powerful contrast to "the only livable life ... the one we saw from this side ... this poor people's side with the trail of yellow leaves of our uncountable years of misfortune and our ungraspable instants of happiness, where love was contaminated by the seeds of death but was all love" (250) of others, of the world, of the magic of this world, about which the despot, in his isolation and quiet desperation, knows nothing, and about which *we* know all that we can know, all that can be known.

In a fugitive instance reminiscent of *Pedro Paramo*, there occurs the briefest of dialogues between the living and the dead: "have a good death mother, he said to her, a very good death son, she answered him in the crypt" (248). Further, in a strange mix of what is figural and literal, magical and ephemeral, the very fine line between the quick and the dead may be seen on the general's homeground, in the palace, that illusory realm of reflection and odd deflection, in which he finds a dead cow in a mirror — "He saw a cow collapsed on her back in the rear of the mirror in the music room ... she was dead, what a mess ... there was a dead cow inside a mirror" (247) — an image matched earlier in this marvelous, magical vision by "pairs of manatees tricked by the illusion that they were engendering mermaids among the shadowy irises of the round mirrors in the presidential stateroom" (223) of a palace and a country in which anything can happen, in which manatees make mermaids by mating in mirrors.

Magical realism extends from the improbable to the possible, or, better, makes the improbable seem possible. In the opening passage of the book, for instance, we read (not quite literally) that it is "thought possible that more than a thousand women had lived" in the palace (8), all at the general's particular disposal. Later, we learn that "it was calculated that... he must have sired five thousand children ... by the countless number of loveless beloveds he had" (48). It would appear, then, that every woman, on average, must have bore him five children, which seems highly improbable, since it is repeatedly affirmed that he had had no special interest in any of them, so that it would have been unlikely for him to have sought out again the particular favors of even one of them. Yet, the alteration in detail from "more than a thousand" to "a countless number," coupled with such obvious inexactitude, takes the whole matter out of the realm of the improbable into that of the remotely possible (should there have simply been more women). How to explain the "fact" that the resultant offspring are all born premature, whole "crews of

seven-month runts" (8), I leave open (as does Garcia Marquez), as the kind of inexplicable detail that can only be accounted for as unmistakably magical realist, which, in and of itself, resists rational explanation.

Thus, in the previously linked two instances, it is entirely possible that the general, limited as he is, might comb the palace "in search of the other lost cows, [looking] for them in the toilets, under the tables, inside every mirror" (247). Being unable to distinguish between concrete reality and figurative thinking, or simply being incapable of the latter (as one "who never knew where the reverse side was and where the right of this life" [251]), he looks in the mirrors where he had, in his murky thinking, found his first cow lurking. But that manatees can be "tricked" into *thinking* (even supposing) that they are "engendering mermaids," as though they can conceive of that, can conceive of anything at all, takes us beyond the realm of the possible into that of the (highly) improbable. Into this rich realm of imaginative excess, the reader on felicitous occasion cheerfully follows, fully engaged by an image of what might be, but in the full knowledge of its grand improbability. In the general's mad search for his precious lost cows, we might trace a move from the improbable to the possible (given the general's seemingly limitless limitations). In the case of the (equally limited?) manatees, however, we remain mired in the murk ourselves, unable to distinguish where and how to make distinctions (should they exist) between probable and improbable, possible and impossible. Yet the one episode effects, or assists in, our suspension of disbelief: after all, can the general be so meticulously idiotic? we might ask. To which the answer is resoundingly in the affirmative. Yet to the preposterous hypothetical query, Can manatees think about mermaids? the answer must be (regardless of what *we* think about these creatures) implacably negative. But what assumptions might we make from all this? Certainly, that magical realism effects its artistic goals within a series of tensions between the probable and the possible, the improbable and the impossible. It accomplishes its aesthetic aims, then, in the tensions between what is thoroughly unlikely, what still might be, and what is (perhaps) likely to be, generating in the process hyperbole and paradox, from whose reflections and refractions, one upon the other, there emerges a single linked entity, affording its own special unity: what might be called either hyperbolic paradox or paradoxical hyperbole, or what we do call magical realism.

In these lights (as opposed to those previously noted) *Pedro Paramo* might well be considered a magical realist text, should one wish to argue the point (I do not), rather than its being a mighty precursor of this mode of making art.

For in that remarkable work of hyperbole and paradox, the living, for instance, converse with the dead, and (to make matters worse — or better yet) the dead do the same (and other things) with the dead (which makes Rulfo's novel from another perspective a successor, rather, within the ancient tradition of Menippean satire). For our purposes, several select instances in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, marked by their brevity and succinct quality, should make our particular point: that magical realism, in its resistance to what might be termed *reason*, or rational argument, represents an inextricable mix of what is and what might be, what has not been and never could be, generated by, and itself generating, what appears to be either highly exaggerated or self-contradictory.

The main door seemed to open by itself with just the push of a voice. (9)

When the wind was long [the general's double was found] sighing out to sea. (17)

[A woman] had been changed into a scorpion for having disobeyed her parents. (19)

[Another is seen] bleeding to death from weeping. (45)

[The general] had kept on growing until the age of one hundred and at one hundred fifty he grew a third set of teeth. (47)

[The general] knew the language of certain animals ... had the virtue of being able to anticipate the designs of nature ... could guess a person's thoughts by one look in the eyes, and.. .had the secret of a salt with the virtue of curing lepers' sores and making cripples walk. (48)

[He is the proud owner of] a live mermaid in a fishbowl, a lifesize wind-up angel [and] a gigantic shell in which the listener didn't hear the sound of the waves and the sea wind but the strains of the national anthem. (53)

All he had to do was point at trees for them to bear fruit and at animals for them to grow and at men for them to prosper. (87)

[He contemplates] the muddy swamp where the city had been and on whose limitless surface a world of drowned hens floated. (97)

He had the light of the sun tinted red along with the glow of the stars to cure ... scarlet fever. (106)

In all such instances it seems wisest and best to leave to others the problem to decide which of these is possible or probable, improbable or impossible. What should be clear, however, is that such are the paradoxical, hyperbolic detail that compose our hypothetical mosaic of excess posited at the start. Yet other equally compelling questions find their place. What might be the criteria by which events are described as "magical realist"? Might the carnivalized cannibalism that closes chapter three (119) be regarded as an instance of magical realism? Had there ever been a "saint," who, "when she was still young [and] languid, went about dressed in rags, barefoot, and had to use her lower parts in order to eat" (141)? Could our great "captive monarch" (201) have gone about in his palace "with a candle fighting with the cows for a place to sleep" (233)? What might be the fine line between truth and lie, between magical realist detail and outright falsehood — something somehow fallacious or untrue within the fiction itself?

For certainly this particular fiction (as does much of fiction) deals with the problem of the distinction between the lie and the truth. Early in the novel the general's double, facing a death designed for the general, unburdens himself ("without the least bit of respect" [28]) of all the truths he had previously kept concealed, affording a complete reversal of the general's governing maxim that it is the lie that must be revealed. Hence there are instances when truths are declared lies (117-18), when lies are told to ingratiate the general (131,138), when a priest declares, lying: "these poor people love your excellency as they love their own lives" (147). The general in turn lies when he denies what he knows: "I don't know the truth," he says, to which there is the hypocritical response: "Of course your excellency doesn't know the truth, my word as a man" (148). In a compelling sense the entire book is about denying truth and affirming lies. Further, the general repeatedly declares that there is no difference, in any case, since "with time" the lie "will be the truth" (159, 161). On the one hand truth thus becomes submerged within falsehood, so that one might well wonder "where the hell was the truth in that bog of contradictory truths that seem less true than if they were lies" (220). On the other truth becomes subordinated to lie, so that "he discovered in the course of his uncountable years that a lie is more comfortable than doubt, more useful than love, more lasting than truth" (250). But if that is "true," then how can it have happened that "truth came back to surprise him with the news that the world was changing and life was going on" (224)? Clearly, in a text so richly infused with irony, when we are told that "there was always another truth behind the truth" (45), we might also infer that there is a

corresponding ever-emergent truth, ever ready to emerge — by however clever means — from behind the lie, where such means are marked by excess, and informed by the irony contained within the paradox and hyperbole that underlies magical realist poetry.

Further, in this book of wonders and horrors, of magic and marvels, the reader is told, improbably but possibly, of "the traffic of whores and soldiers in the toilets" of the palace (12); that "subversive parrots" had made up songs mocking him and that his security services were hunting them and severely punishing them (76); that he could make the rains cease and the sun shine, give life back to the drowned hens, order "the waters to recede and they receded" (98); that he demanded that they reverse the course of this river [and] they reversed it (102); that thirty grand pianos on mule back all went over a cliff (161); that the general's wife and son were assassinated by sixty trained attack dogs who ate them alive (185-86). There is due mention of "illusory presidents who lasted one night" (236), in contrast to the general who had lasted longer than anyone, including himself, can remember. We are told at the start that "his whole body [found dead] was sprouting tiny lichens and parasitic animals from the depths of the sea" (11). Yet, how do we explain this obvious paradox of ocean dwelling creatures thriving on an earthbound corpse — and all other such difficult details — if not in terms of the magical realist *fact* itself, unconnected though it may be, that comprises our hypothetical mosaic of excess? Thus, in this case, at the end, we are told (entirely out of the present context): he was "a dry-land drowned man in whose cracks and crannies parasites from the reefs at the bottom of the sea were proliferating" (238-39). As the general says (four times in succession): "that's that" (113), and let us, very much in the spirit of the book, leave it at that.

Or, better: finish it with a grand *hyperbolic* mix of our previously detailed elements of excess exhibited, *paradoxically*, in the stunning image of a religious order still maintaining proper secular order around the dining table under water.

We cut through the gloomy streams of the cloister of the convent of Biscayan nuns, we saw the abandoned cells, we saw the harpsichord adrift in the intimate pool of the music room, in the depths of the sleeping waters of the refectory we saw the whole community of virgins drowned in their dinner places at the long table with the food served on it. (97)

Such, in the end, is magical realism best exemplified and thus best identified.

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