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## The Task of the Historian in *El general en su laberinto*

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**Abstract:** In *El general en su laberinto*, García Márquez offers a critique of the historical process and examination of the methodology of history as a discipline in several interrelated dimensions. Central to a vision of the novel as “historiographic metafiction” are the author’s disclosure of his own methodology in compiling the story of Bolívar and the relationship between oral versions and written documents within the fiction itself.

**Key Words:** Latin American narrative, 20th century, García Márquez (Gabriel), *general en su laberinto (El)*, historiographic metafiction, Colombian literature, history

**W**hile *El general en su laberinto* is in many ways a continuation of García Márquez’ criticism of Latin America’s official history seen in his earlier works, the novel contrasts sharply with his previous fictions. In *Cien años de soledad* manuscripts become a literary metaphor of what the mythical and the historical dimensions of the text have already told us: only in self-understanding can we meet the challenge of the Latin American predicament. And in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* the truth of official language is challenged by the account of the text’s Narrator.<sup>1</sup> *El general en su laberinto* differs from these in employing narrative strategies which seek to answer in a much more overt and didactic fashion questions that the novel poses about history: What role do historical contexts play in the literary representation of history? How can historical knowledge be obtained?<sup>2</sup>

Historical truth has been a popular topic in Latin American contemporary literature as novelists share the notion that, through fiction, history becomes humanized and thus more understandable and accessible for the reader. In her recent text, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon coins the term “historiographic metafiction” in order to describe the nature of postmodern narratives which, according to the author, ask two central questions from history: “How can we know the past? What can we know of it?” (*Poetics* 92):

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.” (*Poetics* 93)

Hutcheon’s model of the historiographic metafiction is a useful means to examine the degree and the manner in which history and fiction interact with one another in *El general en su laberinto* in order to enhance our basic understanding of the meaning of history in García Márquez’ fiction.

*El general* can be considered a historiographic metafiction because it dramatizes the process of historical reconstruction by means of a fictional historian who confronts the process of how official history is created. The critique of the historical process and the task of the historian in his recreation of Bolívar’s fictional world takes various dimensions which are interrelated.

Originally published in 1989, the novel has elicited responses from the critics which have ranged from outrage to unqualified praise (Bushnell). Some reviewers (especially those in Latin America) simply have accused García Márquez of being unpatriotic due to his unflattering portrait of Bolívar, one of Latin America’s most eminent heroes. On the other hand, critics in the United States have largely celebrated García Márquez’ portrait of this

national hero and considered it a *tour de force*. The reasons for these critical disagreements clearly have to do with García Márquez controversial and daring portrait of a central figure in Latin American history.

The novel reconstructs a time in the life of Simón Bolívar that has no precedent in history, since there is nothing in the historical record which documents the last fourteen days of Bolívar's existence. The book begins at the point in which Bolívar is rejected as president of the new government that he himself helped to create. In an almost dejected state, Bolívar leaves Bogotá for a journey down the Magdalena river with the stated intention of sailing to Europe, but he never succeeds. A combination of failing health, inclement weather, and adverse political conditions render his objectives impossible to attain. The last pages of the book tell of Bolívar's despair and death due to his inability to suppress the anarchy and civil war that he felt would destroy his country.<sup>3</sup> García Márquez does not attempt to write Bolívar's entire life, but instead recreates a brief segment thereof: the final two weeks. In the book we know Bolívar first as a human being and as an ordinary man with all his defects and weaknesses. This personal and anonymous representation of a national hero becomes García Márquez' confrontation of Bolívar's official history in order to question its exclusive claim to truth.

If we think of the "Gratitudes" as the novel's *Ars Poetica*, we can more easily grasp García Márquez' acknowledgement of the construction of his own tale. In this segment of the work, García Márquez shows how the historian both constructs and textualizes the past. This crucial segment begins as if it were meant to be read as separate from the novel's fiction. Here García Márquez, author, addresses the reader as he traces the reasons which led him to write on this particular topic:

Por otra parte los fundamentos históricos me preocupaban poco, pues el último viaje por el río es el tiempo menos documentado de la vida de Bolívar.... Sin embargo desde el primer capítulo tuve que hacer alguna consulta ocasional sobre su modo de vida, y esa consulta me remitió a otra, y luego a otra más, y a otra más, hasta más no poder. Durante dos años me fui hundiendo en las arenas movedizas de una documentación torrencial contradictoria y muchas veces incierta.... Mi

falta de experiencia y de método en la investigación histórica hizo aún mas arduos mis días. (271-72)

These comments are of relevance because by assuming the role of the historian and, by letting the reader know how the book was constructed, García Márquez is in fact exploiting the very methodology he seeks to criticize. At one point in this segment the author equates himself with other Bolívar historians while at the same time acknowledging that he has no intention of giving up his identity as a writer: "Este libro no habría sido posible sin el auxilio de quienes trillaron esos territorios antes que yo, durante un siglo y medio, y me hicieron más fácil la temeridad literaria de contar una vida con una documentación tiránica, sin renunciar a los fueros desafortunados de la novela" (272).

García Márquez appears to simultaneously set himself the objectives of a historian and those of a novelist in the writing of this novel. It is difficult at times to interpret what he means by stating that he is most grateful to a group of his friends who helped him with his greatest doubts such as "el pensamiento político *real* [my emphasis] de Bolívar en medio de sus contradicciones flagrantes" (272). What does García Márquez mean by the word *real*? Does the author pretend to espouse a claim to an only truth?

While the interpretation of this passage can only be left in ambiguity, what is of interest here is the description of the author's own description of his methodology in writing the novel, the very same methodology which happens to be the object of his criticism. The thoroughness with which García Márquez describes for the reader his sources and his consultants gives the impression that the author set out to write a historical and not a fictional account:

El historiador boliviano Vinicio Romero Martínez me ayudó desde Caracas...con una revisión implacable de los datos históricos en la versión final.... Mi viejo amigo Aníbal Noguera Mendoza... descubrió media docena de falacias mortales y anacronismos suicidas que habrían sembrado dudas sobre el rigor de esta novela. (273-74)

Contradictions abound in the possible intentions of this particular segment, for if, on the one hand, García Márquez speaks of his de-

sire and interest in obtaining *rigor histórico*, on the other, he closes this segment not as a historian but as a novelist, when he admits that perhaps some inaccuracies would have added unintentional humor to the “horror” of his tale. Thus, in this passage García Márquez addresses the reader on the conventions and devices used by novelists and historians alike and somehow places the activity of the historian at the same level as the activity of the writer of fiction.

Though biographical characters occur in García Márquez’ previous fiction, never before did the author include any commentary regarding his own writing methodology. The importance of his narrative disclosures are even more significant in terms of the objectives he set out to answer via this novel. If the entire novel (which chronologically precedes the “Gratitudes”) challenges history’s claim to truth, the “Gratitudes” exploit this claim by asserting the author’s desire to get at the “real” political thinking of Bolívar and by insisting on the historical accuracy of its facts.

By assuming the identity of a historian, García Márquez seeks to undertake his exploration of historical knowledge from within. The “Gratitudes” segment suggests that historians, and even more so, their readers, must learn to be self-conscious of their narratives. Moreover, the segment reminds us that a claim to truth is not the property of any text; rather it is the result of how a historian (as reader) interprets the facts. The content of this segment suggests the vulnerability as well as the power of any historian.

García Márquez’ self-conscious meditation on history in this text resembles the work of contemporary historians, such as Hayden White, who are currently revising the methodology of history as a discipline. As White reminds us “facts are not given but constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events” (*Tropics* 43). From the publication of his 1973 work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* to his 1987 collection of essays *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Hayden White has been applying the theories of cultural and post-structuralist critics Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Derrida, as

well as the approaches of such philosophers of history as Nietzsche and Foucault to a re-evaluation of historical narrative. Likewise, Dominick LaCapra in his *History and Criticism* analyzes the major scholarly works in his field, and concludes that for the writing and for the reading of history, positivistic models still prevail.

García Márquez’ insistence on “rigor histórico” affirmed in the “Gratitudes” is contradicted by the preference given to oral history in the telling of Bolívar’s tale. Walter Ong, in his book *Orality and Literacy*, postulates that every reader possesses a submerged connection with an oral tradition. This converges with García Márquez’ preoccupation with the relationship between spoken and written versions of history. For García Márquez the oral component of history apparently consists of the multiple, often contradictory, stories and meanings of the day-to-day verbal interactions of living peoples. History is a series of “stories” created by the people, stories which needed to be heard.

According to Walter Ong, the orality of any given culture, residing in the unwritten tales of its peoples, possesses a spontaneity and liveliness which is lost once this culture commits its tales to writing (*Orality* 147). Ong also tells us that in primary oral cultures the oral performer and live audience interact with one another because the performer responds to the listener, whereas the writer’s audience (of readers) is always absent at the moment of writing (“The Writer’s” 16). It is precisely the participatory quality and contextuality of oral speech that García Márquez’ historian values in his reconstruction of Bolívar’s story. The description of Manuela Saénz as a reader within the text is a case in point:

Manuela le leyó durante dos horas.... Leía a la luz escasa de la palmatoria, sentada en un sillón que aún tenía el escudo de armas del último virrey, y él la escuchaba tendido bocarriba en la cama.... El libro se llamaba *Leción de noticias y rumores que corrieron por Lima en el año de gracia de 1926...* y ella lo leía con unos énfasis teatrales que le iban muy bien al estilo del autor. (15)

Manuela’s oral rendition restores and provides an experiential, oral dimension to the text she reads. This passage is important because in it the fictional historian describes the

way in which Manuela reads the text aloud, a “theatrical” manner in consonance with the style of the text she is reading. The scene becomes a metaphor for the activity of the fictional historian in *El general en su laberinto*, for as Manuela gives context to the spoken words, she recovers and gives life to written history.

Real-life historians likewise have exhibited a desire to retrieve the spontaneous quality of oral history. For example, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who wrote during Bolívar’s time, was aware that a complete picture of Facundo Quiroga would not emerge until the stories and legends surrounding the *caudillo* were made part of his profile:

He evocado, pues, mis recuerdos, y buscando para complementarlos, los detalles que han podido suministrarme hombres que lo conocieron en su infancia... que han visto con sus ojos unos hechos, oído otros... (*Facundo* 5)

Sarmiento’s method was based on the idea of “hearing” the voice of the common people as he recreated the life of Facundo. To achieve his objectives, Sarmiento even reproduces interviews with the citizens of La Rioja in order to provide a more complete picture of his subject: “a uno de los muchos interrogatorios que he dirigido para conocer a fondo los hechos sobre que fundo mis teorías” (39). It is no coincidence that Sarmiento, in his introduction to *Facundo*, criticizes the way biographers had portrayed Bolívar:

Colombia tiene llanos, vida pastoril, vida bárbara, americana, pura y de ahí partió el gran Bolívar; de aquel barro hizo su glorioso edificio. ¿Cómo es pues que su biografía lo asemeja a cualquier general europeo de esclarecidas prendas? (6)

An accurate picture of Bolívar, Sarmiento tells us, would not be obtained until his biographers could take into account his American side, “que lo traduzcan a su idioma natal” (7).

García Márquez’ fictional historian answers the same concerns of Sarmiento as he translates into print the legends and stories that make up the private life of Bolívar. In giving a voice to the common people, the fictional historian in *El general en su laberinto* is adopting a methodology for writing history which was relevant to historians of Bolívar’s time.

The narrating perspectives which tell the

story of Bolívar are there to continually contextualize and criticize what we know as “official history.” A tension arises in that the written documents and the narrating voices appear to be at odds with one another. A rhythm is established within the narrative in which the oral version of events seems to overpower and undermine that which was written. Moreover, the story of Bolívar is narrated by means of a juxtaposition of oral versions on the one hand—via the voices of the omniscient historian as well as those of José Palacios and the character of Bolívar—and on the other hand, written history—the many documents that are written or read by the fictional Bolívar throughout the course of the novel.

From the outset of the novel, the narrator places considerable emphasis on non-verifiable events. In the first chapter, the reader is confronted by Bolívar’s desire to write down his memoirs and by his recollection of a dream he wishes to include in his writings: “Le pidió a José Palacios... que le dispusiera los medios para empezar a escribir sus memorias.... Quería empezar por su recuerdo más antiguo que era un sueño que tuvo en la hacienda de San Mateo en Venezuela poco después de cumplir los tres años” (30). The contradiction here is evident. Bolívar wishes to write down his past and the first subject he chooses is not a historical incident but, instead, a dream about a black mule that had ravaged his possessions and destroyed his house. In addition to setting the atmosphere of impending death which will prevail throughout this text, the dream becomes a prime example of Bolívar’s own *intrahistoria*. Bolívar’s initial selection of a dream over reality as the possible subject of his own memoirs is important, for it sets the tone of a narration that will continually refute the usual methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction.

From the preference of the general’s readings (Manuela Saéñz would read at night to him from *Lección de noticias y rumores en Lima*) to the value he places on what he considers the “rumors” of war, the text insists on the importance of creating a history which would include those events that could not be considered facts, a history complemented and contextualized by legend, which falls in the

realm of orality.

Legend also figures within the text in the description of the fictional Bolívar. Nevertheless, the voice of the historian is selective in his use of the legends which surround his protagonist. For example, he seems to accept the legend that Bolívar slept on a saddle: "Desde que empezaron las guerras de independencia había cabalgado dieciocho mil leguas....Nadie desmentía nunca la leyenda de que dormía cabalgando" (51). Yet the anonymous historian refuses to accept the rumors about Bolívar's extensive womanizing:

Desde antes de la victoria se decía que por lo menos tres batallas se habían perdido en las guerras de independencia solo porque él no estaba dónde debía sino en la cama de una mujer....Suposición falsa, como tantas otras, pues sus serrallos de guerra fueron una de las muchas fábulas de salón que lo persiguieron hasta más allá de la muerte. (121)

Thus the profile of Bolívar in this text becomes an inseparable mixture of rumors and fact. As readers we are soon aware of the historian's strategy of equalizing the official record, "Su estatura oficial era de un metro con sesenta y cinco..." (146) with the rumors surrounding his protagonist.

José Palacios' mediating role between spoken and written history is crucial in the development of the novel's oral dimension. Palacios' role as Bolívar's (and the reader's) interpreter of the written word *even though he was unable to read* becomes a metaphor for the text's message regarding the process of writing history:

No sabía ni leer ni escribir y se había resistido a aprender con el argumento simple de que no había sabiduría mayor que la de los burros. Pero en cambio era capaz de recordar cualquier frase que hubiera oído por casualidad y aquélla no la recordaba. (65)

When Bolívar receives a coded letter which he is unable to interpret, he relies on the truth of the spoken word: "era normal en esa época que se enrevesaran los recados y que los partes militares fueran embrollados a propósito por razones de seguridad" (240). Confronted by the mystery of this letter, Bolívar sends José Palacios to town in order to obtain information which might allow a more accurate interpretation of its message. The irony

here is double, since the reader has already been informed that Palacios is illiterate.

Palacios' "oral memory" becomes essential in the recreation of García Márquez' Bolívar, for it is this character who places the events surrounding Bolívar's past in the context of everyday life. The episode concerning the execution of Piar, one of Bolívar's closest allies, is a case in point. Palacios begins his interpretation of this event by placing it in historical time, as he does many times during the narrative: "Sábado dieciséis de octubre, dijo José Palacios"; ...." Ya el general Piar fue fusilado en Angostura, y no hoy a las cinco de la tarde, sino un día como hoy de hace trece años" (231-32). This incident, which obviously troubles Bolívar, is outside the action of the text but is rescued for the reader by Palacios once the loyal servant utters the date. Piar is a good friend, but Bolívar is forced to execute him after he has learned of his possible treason. Here we learn the facts that official written history did not bother to record: "El general se había negado a presenciar la ejecución. El único que estaba en su casa era José Palacios y éste lo vió luchando por reprimir las lágrimas cuando oyó la descarga" (234). The idea that all written history can be subjective is articulated frequently throughout the story: "Ya sé que se burlan de mí porque en una misma carta, en un mismo día, a una misma persona le digo una cosa y la contraria" (206). Episodes such as this make clear the challenge of García Márquez' Bolívar to the absolute claims to truth assumed by historical writing. Oral history is much more important than that which eventually gets written: "el correo que fué una de sus obsesiones dominantes se le convirtió en un martirio....En cambio los correos clandestinos se volvieron más pródigos y apresurados. De modo que el general tenía noticia de las noticias antes de que llegaran y le sobraba tiempo de madurar sus determinaciones" (205).

Not only does Bolívar favor unwritten, clandestine reports over official news, but he also exhibits angry resentment towards the written word. Throughout the narrative, Bolívar's voice is explicit regarding his disdain for written history and cautions against the trap that is the illusion of capturing facts with words.

When asked about his decision to write his memoirs Bolívar answers: "Jamás, esas son vainas de los muertos" (205). Likewise, sensing his own death, Bolívar gives orders to destroy all of the letters he had written, "para que no quedaran rastros de sus horas sombrías" (228). In the same vein, he asks Santander to destroy all the letters he had written: "No mande usted a publicar mis cartas ni vivo ni muerto porque están escritas con mucha libertad y con mucho desorden" (228). The contrast between the letters Bolívar writes and those of Santander is evident. Moreover, Bolívar is fully aware of the possibility for distortion that is inherent in a letter: "Tampoco lo complació Santander cuyas cartas al contrario de las suyas eran perfectas de forma y de fondo y se veía a simple vista que las escribía con conciencia de que el destinatario final era la historia" (228). Finally, the two letters which Bolívar sends to Urdaneta offer a notable example of the tension expressed in this narrative between history and orality. The first one begins with "Excelentísimo señor," while the second one begins with "Mi querido General". The omniscient voice of the historian elaborates on the fact that Bolívar is fully conscious of the obligatory filter that exists between official writing and the oral style of personal writing.

While the narrative voices in the text help the reader delve into Bolívar's inner history, the texts that enter into the world of the novel also constitute a refutation of an easy way of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. The episode in which the omniscient voice speaks of the historically famous *Carta de Jamaica* signals the essential relationship between history and orality in this celebrated text. In this instance the historian's voice situates the words of Bolívar *before* they become official history, it recreates for the reader the context and the spirit in which the words became reality. García Márquez infuses new meaning into this famous historical document by attempting to complement and to "rectify" history with orality: "no son los españoles sino nuestra propia desunión lo que nos ha llevado de nuevo a la esclavitud" (85), says Bolívar during a conversation which would eventually become one of Latin América's most famous

documents. Later on, the omniscient narrator adds: "Durante el almuerzo no le prestó atención a nadie más que a sus propios fantasmas. Habló... soltando sentencias proféticas... muchas de las cuales estarían en una proclama épica publicada días después en un periódico de Kingston, y que la historia habría de consagrar como la *Carta de Jamaica*" (85).

Other historical documents such as García Márquez' 1982 Nobel Address also figure in this author's fictional weaving of Bolívar's tale. Thus it is possible to attribute to a novel's character (in this case Bolívar) the political ideas (if not the words) of the author himself. The presence of biographical intertexts becomes García Márquez' most didactic strategy in his exploration of the question of how history gets written.

The episode relates the occasion in which Bolívar shares a dinner with a French diplomat who seems to be very critical of Latin Americans and the way they were going about obtaining their independence from Spain. The Frenchman, who in the novel is characterized as "arrogant," insists on giving Bolívar some advice regarding "cual sería en definitiva el sistema de gobierno adecuado para las nuevas repúblicas" (129). Upon hearing such insolence, Bolívar jumps up and responds with a long, angry tirade which reflects some of the content of García Márquez' now famous Nobel Speech:

No nos hagan más el favor de decirnos lo que debemos hacer... no traten de enseñarnos como debemos ser, no traten de que seamos iguales a ustedes, no pretendan que hagamos en veinte años lo que ustedes han hecho tan mal en dos mil... Por favor, carajos, déjennos hacer tranquilos nuestra Edad Media. (132)

The fictional Bolívar's words echo the words that appear in García Márquez' Nobel address:

The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown ever less free, ever more solitary. Venerable Europe would perhaps be more perceptive if it tried to see us in its own past. If only it recalled that London took three hundred years to build its first city wall, and three hundred years more to acquire a bishop; that Rome labored in a gloom of uncertainty for twenty centuries, until an Etruscan king anchored it in history.... (210)

By having the fictional Bolívar argue García Márquez' own ideas regarding the

Latin American predicament, the author is giving historical resonance to his own words. Moreover, this episode constitutes an example of an overt didactic strategy which is unusual for García Márquez as a novelist. Reminiscent of Nietzsche's and Foucault's reflections on history, García Márquez reminds us that those in power control history.

The documents in *El general en su laberinto* must be heard as well as read. Not unlike today's theorists of history, García Márquez embarks on a reassessment of the facts surrounding the life of Bolívar, reminding us about the important relationship between information and interpretation. To challenge history is not to deny it, and so, in this novel, García Márquez invites the reader to reflect on the process of how history gets written.

**T**he assumption of the role of a historian by the author of the novel, as well as the juxtaposition of oral and written accounts in the telling of Bolívar's tale, clearly point to García Márquez' interest in new ways of conceptualizing the Latin American past. Thus the greatness of García Márquez' Bolívar becomes the author's insistence on the idea of listening to the unwritten voices that make up history in analyzing the Latin American past. The words of the fictional Bolívar serve to remind us of the complexities inherent in the task of the historian: "Pues bien, todo es cierto pero circunstancial" (207).

## ■ NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For discussion of this subject in *Cien años* see Fuentes and González Echevarría (*The Novel*), and in *Crónica*, Borland.

<sup>2</sup>For additional studies of historiography and this novel in different contexts, see González Echevarría's "García Márquez y la voz de Bolívar," which ties *El general* to his larger theory about anthropology, the law, and the Latin American novel, expounded in *Myth and Archive*; articles by Bushnell, Oviedo, Pope, and McMurray in a special issue of *Revista de Estudios Colombianos* (1989); and Palencia-Roth's study "Labyrinths of Love and History."

<sup>3</sup>Substantial book reviews of *El general en su laberinto* are plentiful in both English and Spanish, among them essays by Ortega and Atwood.

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