

Art at The End of The Tunnel

In 1955, the famous Colombian author and Nobel Laureate, Gabriel García Márquez, while working in *El Espectador*, Bogotá's second newspaper, published one of his most celebrated articles. It was the story of Luis Alejandro Velasco, a sailor who had been washed overboard by a huge wave from the deck of the navy destroyer, the *Caldas*, while sailing from Mobile, Alabama, to the walled city of Cartagena de Indias in the Colombian Atlantic coast. As the man tumbled into the ocean, he heard calls and yells and realized he wasn't alone. Seven other seamen had also plunged into the roaring waters, along with numerous boxes and crates, and, miraculously, a small raft which Velasco grabbed as it floated by and immediately climbed in. Tragically, the other sailors slipped beneath the surface and drowned just minutes after the accident, and during ten long and insufferable days, Velasco drifted alone in the open sea, tossed by the winds and tides, threatened by sharks and with absolutely nothing to eat or drink. Finally, one morning, almost on the brink of exhaustion, the sailor caught sight of a small speck of land in the distance, and in spite of his weakness, a deep gash in his knee and the fear that the shimmering image in the horizon was just another mirage, one of the many he had witnessed in the previous days,

he jumped into the water, abandoned the raft and swam for his life. After a monumental effort, Velasco managed, amazingly, to reach shore: a deserted yet tangible stretch of white beach. A few moments later, a dog appeared, and then a man leading a mule, and the overwhelming desire the sailor felt at that instant, stronger even than the paramount need to eat or drink, was the urgency to tell the stranger what had happened to him. In other words, to tell his story.

As you know, this is the plot of García Márquez's book, *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*. However, I also believe that the anecdote I've just recounted is an appropriate metaphor for what we experience as artists in Latin America: despite the violence and the bloodshed, and the poverty and the difficulties that torment our continent, we also feel the pressing need to tell our stories. And, I can assure you, we definitely have stories to tell.

Allow me to speak about one nation in particular, Colombia, where I was born. This country's reality is hard to fathom and almost impossible to decipher, but never boring. Many times I've been asked why is it that there are so few public demonstrations of outrage in Colombia, crowds of protesters rejecting the atrocious violence we experience on a daily basis. In Spain, for example, whenever the terrorist group ETA assassinates a fellow member of society, the citizens take to the streets to condemn the murder, frequently by the millions. Some believe that these kinds of marches do not take place more often in

Colombia due to the population's indifference, apathy or just plain resignation. Perhaps the reason is more understandable but at the same time more tragic: if we responded in mass numbers to denounce every violent death that occurs in Colombia, we would literally have to take to the streets between 80 to 90 times a day. During the past two decades alone, an average of more than 30,000 people have met a violent death in Colombia every year. Just to compare: the European country that has suffered the most number of kidnappings is Italy, mainly as a result of internal vendettas and retaliations between the Cosa Nostra and other groups of organized crime, and many still recall the barbarous abduction of the former Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, who was murdered by the Red Brigades in 1978 and later forsaken in the trunk of a car, just a few feet away from his office. However, after World War II, Italy has experienced less than 700 kidnappings in total. In Colombia, on the other hand, we have suffered an average of three or four times as many kidnappings every year —and of those responsible for these crimes, approximately 3 to 5 percent are ever convicted, compared, for example, to 95 percent in the US. One of the worst crises in European history after the Second World War was the long and bitter conflict in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, during the extent of that difficult period, known as The Troubles, 3,526 victims perished in its wake. That constitutes, approximately, one tenth of the violent deaths that take place in Colombia every year. Without a doubt, Colombia is one of the few

countries in the world where four presidential candidates have been assassinated in one election, and where an entire political party, the Unión Patriótica, was literally obliterated by gunfire. We have a population of little less than 45 million people, yet over 5 million of them have been displaced, forced to abandon their homes as a consequence of the violence, while at the same time we experience, on average, six suicides a day, as was recently reported by the National Institute of Legal Medicine. It is significant that the community that suffers the most from this proliferation of suicides is the Indian population, and just a few months ago —the same report indicated—, at least one Amerindian in the department of Vaupés committed suicide every week. And not only this. Three Colombians die every seven days owing exclusively to lost or stray bullets. From my own experience I can tell you that I have seen massacres reported in the morning news in Bogotá that fail to make the television broadcasts by the end of the day, simply because those tragedies have been overshadowed and buried deep beneath the avalanche of other calamities, just as dramatic and disturbing, but simply more recent.

Still, what I find most amazing, above everything else, are not these statistics that paint such a grim and dismal portrait of my country, but the fact that Colombia continues its often solitary struggle to move forward in spite of such a crude reality. Our democracy is the oldest and the most stable in Latin America. Even if we are burdened by

poverty and the brutal effects of underdevelopment, our finances have always been regarded as seriously managed, avoiding the catastrophic results of hyperinflation and monetary irresponsibility that have plagued so many of our neighbors. Our economy has been recently praised as a success story, foreign investment is on the rise, and the effort to modernize our institutions, replace a poorly representative democracy with a working, competent and participative democracy, and make our judicial system more efficient and expedient, have literally obsessed various of our governments. I believe that not many countries could survive just one of Colombia's plights without sliding into the abyss of chaos. We, on the other hand, must deal with crippling levels of poverty; terrorism on a truly colossal scale; powerful guerrilla movements that lost, many years ago, all romantic traces of their Leftist ideology and today are extremely ruthless, bloody and, above all, very well funded; murderous drug cartels that have killed thousands of people, endangered our basic freedoms —beginning with our freedom of expression—, intimidated our judicial branch and unleashed upon the country severe international consequences; and heartless paramilitary forces that originated as a response against the abuses of the guerrilla and the lack of action by the Government, and which were fortunately dismantled by the previous administration, but not before tormenting the nation for decades and doubling the number of massacres that the guerrilla inflicted upon the unarmed population —regrettably, by the way, it seems that some of

these paramilitary groups are resurfacing now in the guise of criminal bands, known in my country as the *Bacrim*. Colombia, I say, deals with all these conflicts at the same time and yet is slowly but boldly striving to construct a more stable, modern and peaceful society. Moreover, the latest data indicates that, with luck, we may be leaving the darkest of nights behind us. The number of annual violent deaths has decreased; there are new and effective legal instruments available to all the people—and not just the wealthy few—that deliver a speedier justice; our military forces are better equipped and have struck major blows against the guerrilla; kidnappings, massacres and the assaults on towns have fallen substantially, and the police has dismantled the largest drug cartels. It is obvious that in all of these fronts, of course, much more can and still needs to be done, since crushing problems still exist such as poverty, inequality, rigid class distinctions and grave social injustices. However, it appears that an overall feeling of hope and confidence, for the first time in many years, is spreading throughout the nation.

In any case, I am convinced that nothing testifies more to our vitality than the proliferation of the arts in Colombia. For us to paint, sculpt, write, dance or sing are not simply forms of entertainment or aesthetic endeavors. It may sound excessive, but perhaps these manifestations are also our strongest form of resistance, the arms we have at our disposal to affirm our will to survive. The arts in general, despite their many differences, in my opinion share a common feature:

they usually celebrate —frequently in odd and mysterious ways— the value of life. Maybe that is why the arts often —but not always, of course— flourish in areas that have been tormented by social conflict; lands exposed to hunger, destitution, injustice and violence, where the fragile and amazing miracle that is life has been lost or threatened. Russia in the 19th century; the United States during the Lost Generation; Latin America during the 20th century; and the dance and music produced by African Americans, are vivid examples of an almost desperate artistic activity. It's as if, parallel to the pain and the hardships and the suffering, artists create and offer their works to preserve what is good and vital in the human spirit. As proof and evidence of the perseverance of life.

Colombia is a perfect example of this paradox. At first glance, people wonder why there is such an artistic frenzy in a country with so little funding from the Government, and with so many basic needs that have yet to be resolved. Later, it becomes apparent that it is not in spite of, but precisely because of the violence that torments our daily existence, that these aesthetic expressions are so abundant. Every year, it seems, there are more festivals of poetry, cinema and theatre; more exhibitions of art, more concerts of music and more book fairs that attract multitudes. Poetry readings in Medellín are only surpassed in the number of spectators by important soccer matches. On any given Sunday, an average of 10,000 people come to the Luis Ángel Arango Library in Bogotá to read, compared with the Library at the Georges Pompidou

Center in Paris, which receives 8,000 people. The three museums of the Banco de la República, located in the very heart of Bogotá, have more visitors per year than people who go to the city's major stadium —the Campín— to watch football games. And now there is a steady passing of torches in every artistic media. Our new generation of painters is one of the finest in Latin America. Our young singers have become international rock stars. We are obtaining recognition in acting and style, and a new generation of writers is once more being translated and published abroad. Of course, we would all like to see more, much more art and culture, but when you consider the atmosphere of tension and the context of poverty in which most of these works originate, the result is truly impressive. I know that some interpret these artistic manifestations as nothing more than a form of denial or escapism. I prefer to consider them as the bravest and more creative expressions of our will to endure. Pessimism and cynicism, in a country such as Colombia, despite being so easy, predictable and even understandable, have always seemed to me to be an error in terms of, shall we say, patriotism. That's why I agree with the words of Jorge Luis Borges: "Hope is a duty".

In my particular field, I can assure you that a new generation of writers is expanding our literary horizon. In Colombia, as you know, there are basically three major groups of novelists. In a summit of his own, García Márquez remains a massive figure, an author whom many believe —myself included— that he is the most important novelist in our

language since Miguel de Cervantes. Others affirm that Alvaro Mútiis should sit beside him in that mountaintop of literary prestige. Then, there are a number of writers who are younger than both and who shine in their own light, such as Fernando Vallejo, Oscar Collazos and Laura Restrepo, and also a few who, quite sadly, have recently passed away, liked Germán Espinosa and Rafael Humberto Moreno Durán. Finally, there is a younger generation of novelists, to which I belong, that for the first time in many years is publishing again in Spain, and through Spain in Europe, with a positive response by critics and readers. A few years ago, *The New York Times* published an encouraging article, very generous in its approach, underlying the importance of this new group of writers. My point is that, if maybe thirty years ago you could count the number of novelists in one or two hands, today it's impossible to scoop them all up in outstretched arms.

Now, regarding this new generation of writers, it is evident that our subject matter is very different from one another's, as well as our styles and the texture of our prose. Our most salient characteristic, the one that critics first like to point out, is the fact that our literature is very different from García Márquez's. This, for sure, is no small thing. For years almost everything published in Colombia bore the stamp of his influence, which, as the scholar Harold Bloom has brilliantly argued with other writers, is a common phenomenon given the power and seduction of his voice; one that historically occurs when such a towering figure like

García Márquez appears in the literary stage. Yet I think that it's a testament of the good health of Colombian literature that none of us today are writing under his shadow or continuing his brand of Magical Realism. We have managed to respectfully distance ourselves from one of the great masters of all time, and while we acknowledge his importance and are thankful for his gifts, I think it's sound that we are all following our own creative paths.

Overcoming García Márquez's monumental presence is perhaps the first obstacle that we, as writers of Colombia and Latin America, must deal with when faced with the task of understanding and communicating our reality. And not only García Márquez. We must also avoid being crushed by the admirable works of Borges, Rulfo, Cortázar, Vargas Llosa, Sábato, Fuentes and the entire Latin American "Boom", while, at the same time, we must use them and remain grateful to these artists who have taught us so much, since they have been our closest masters for decades. I am certain that without their works, we would not even be here today. In any case, this is not our only challenge.

Another difficulty that arises, as I mentioned before, is how to deal with the topic of violence that looms over most artists in the continent, especially in Colombia. At first glance the idea of tackling this theme is somewhat daunting, since the magnitude of our violence is so enormous. We then ask ourselves: Should we ignore this material? Are we morally allowed to do so? Or should we feel responsible to give it

voice, compelled to describe its existence with the intention of revealing its roots, explaining its significance, providing some sort of wisdom? Because of historical circumstances —and also due to the nature and barbarity of this violence, a level of depravity that, if you wish to find an equivalent, you must reach back into the Middle Ages—, this subject matter is overbearing and omnipresent in our daily life, occupying a vast dimension and carrying enormous weight. This does not mean, in my view, that the writer must necessarily deal with this theme, since a novelist is free to write about whatever he or she chooses, and it is very dangerous, in a free society, to dictate what the artist should or shouldn't write, paint, compose or sculpt about; however, this brutal reality touches us in such a large degree in our every-day life, that at the same time I don't believe an artist can simply ignore it, and perhaps it is convenient that he or she have a clear position regarding it, and consciously decide to embrace it or decline to do so. I have written books that focus directly on the theme of our violence, and others that deliberately elude it, and from experience I can say that it is beneficial, during the creative process, to know if that material will be present in the work or not, because it contaminates and influences us —and also our characters— in our daily existence, affecting us from the way we drive, to the way we communicate and express ourselves, the way we solve conflicts and manage disputes, and how we deal with political tensions, domestic life

and social relationships. And it does so in such a powerful way that this subject matter should not be handled lightly.

Another challenge that our reality presents in Latin America, and it constitutes a real test for an artist, is that our landscape is amazingly fluid and constantly changing. Mario Vargas Llosa has stated that a novel's first objective is to be believable, and that the author must first seduce the readers and convince them of the story's inner truth, even if it dresses the characters and the plot in fantasy or magic. "It is the power of persuasion, not the documentary value, which determines the artistic worth of a work of fiction," he has said. And precisely because of this, our sprawling cities pose a major problem to a novelist due to their never-ending transformations, the incessant shifts in the landscape. The cities of Europe and many here in the US offer a permanent stage for a writer's work. Even today you can walk through the London of Dickens and Virginia Woolf, the Dublin of James Joyce, and the Paris of Balzac and Victor Hugo. You can retrace the footsteps of Thomas Mann or Hemingway through Venice, of Kafka through Prague, and still see the New York of Capote or Salinger. In all these works you can find many of the landmarks that have been there for centuries and that serve as reference points for the reader. So, when an author mentions the Coliseum in Rome, or has one of his characters walk beneath the breathtaking structure of the Eiffel Tower, or maybe has them stroll through Trafalgar Square and look up at the statue of Lord Nelson,

immediately the reader is situated and locates himself or herself in a shared reality, and thus the basic goal of feeling involved in the scenery, imagining the action or relating to the story has already begun. On the other hand, cities like Bogotá, Cali or Medellín constantly modify their appearance, almost from one year to the next, and so our reference points are always moving. We often feel that our cities live in the permanent state of a construction site, where the neighborhood of yesterday is today's shopping mall, and where yesterday's train station, bus terminal or airport, which were so essential to our past and certainly to our stories, have vanished and moved away or been replaced by newer structures. In other words, our landscape rarely stays in place for a sufficient period of time to offer reliable compass points. So, when someone from Bogotá, for instance, reads one of our stories that takes place there, they may reject it by declaring that the atmosphere is not one they know or recognize, and thus they may feel reluctant to believe in the tale that is presented to them. If you analyze some of the opinions of critics and readers, you may find that this objection is more common than one would imagine.

I know this may sound a bit extreme, since we all enjoy the writers of the past even though their reality has disappeared forever, and we believe in Homer's Troy even though all that remains of his world are stones in the dust. But let me give you an example. Bogotá, during the last 10 years—in other words since the time I have been living here in

the US—, has transformed itself completely and more than once. It has passed from being a basket-case city, burdened with unmanageable problems and difficulties that are simply impossible to solve, to become a model of urban renovation, a triumph of modernization and reform, and yet, once again, to collapse into a metropolitan nightmare, plagued at this moment by more hardships than one can even imagine. How should one describe this reality? Should we even *try* to do so? How to capture a reality that can change so much in a decade? Is this or should this be the objective of a novelist? When a writer invents a town or a city, as Faulkner did with Yoknapatawpha, García Márquez with Macondo, or Juan Rulfo with Comala, the comparison with an actual real-life setting does not usually occur, and therefore the reader will not trip in disbelief and awake from the enchantment of the story, protesting in his or her mind, saying, “Listen, I’ve been there, I *live* there, and I can tell you that that avenue does not resemble what you’ve described, or that town square is too large to be crossed in a few seconds, or the climate is too cold for your characters to walk around at night without catching pneumonia.” Reality, in other words, imposes certain limitations, and even if the artist resorts to illusions or dreams as a means to communicate the story, that does not mean, as García Márquez declared, that one can simply invent anything or say anything we please. “With time I discovered,” he once stated, “that one cannot invent or imagine whatever you feel like, because then you run the risk of telling a lie, and lies are

even graver still in literature than in real life.” Many times it’s nothing more than a problem of description, because when you try to describe a reality, and present it to the people who live in that same reality, it’s very difficult when that reality is invariably changing. Indeed, as we all know, even if the work is fantastic it must still be believable, at least during the telling of the tale. That does not mean that all works have to be realistic, of course; just that all works must convince the reader that they are telling the truth, that the author is not cheating or deceiving them, even if that truth is comical in its presentation or whimsical in its nature. In any case, since we have to deal with a fluid reality, and most of our readers actually live in that same world, the challenge to make it true and believable is something of a task.

Finally, even though our stories, nowadays, are more urban than rural, city life it is not our only scenario. I have also ventured into a world that, for some reason, has been essentially ignored by Spanish speaking novelists, which is the sea. This strikes me as particularly odd, since almost all our poets, at one point or another, have used the sea as an image or a setting for their poems, and most countries in our continent face one ocean and in some cases two, like Mexico and Colombia, and we descend from a former maritime empire which was Spain. Yet, strangely enough, with the exception of a few books by Alvaro Mútis or Arturo Pérez-Reverte, in our language you will not easily find a novelist comparable to Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway or

Patrick O' Brian. Few writers today have tried to explore this extraordinary world, above and below the waves, and that is why I have attempted to roll up my sleeves and collaborate in this enterprise of writing about the sea.

In any case, these are just a few of the challenges that we have, as artists or writers, when confronted with the reality of Latin America.

What should we do, then? Perhaps it is useful to understand that any given reality will always surpass the talent of an individual; that no matter how exhaustive our narrative, there will always be entire sections of society that will not fit into our description, and thus our view must be, by definition, limited and partial. Is this a bad thing? Probably not. On the contrary: precisely from the exclusiveness of our vision comes the force and originality of our own testimony. Therefore, an author like myself must understand that his vision of Bogotá, for example, will be just as partial and limited as any other, fragmented and incomplete without exception. In the end, though, that doesn't matter. What truly matters, what has always mattered, is what I do with the slice of reality that I have chosen to write about, and whether or not I can make it believable, acceptable and, more important still, meaningful. And, if I do, perhaps the reader will also enjoy the illusion and think, for a short while at least, that my reality —my interpretation of reality— is indeed valid and convincing.

This entire question become less intimidating when one comprehends, I believe, that the task of the writer is not simply to document reality, but to offer a personal interpretation of it, and one is as valid as the next, as long as the final result is a work of art that has the quality to stand the test of time. I've noticed that people sometimes try to minimize the achievements of García Márquez, for example, saying that he never really invented anything, since we constantly witness in Latin America fantastic stories and anecdotes just like his, ones that defy and surpass our imagination. But to think this way, in my opinion, is to completely miss the genius of García Márquez, for his work is a verbal construction, one that exists only in his books and in his imagination. And to prove just how singular his talent is, one only has to consider the following: if we were to send to Aracataca, Colombia, the best journalist in the world for whatever period of time, I'm sure that he or she would not be able to write, at the end, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. And even more: just as what Faulkner and Rulfo accomplished, his interpretation of reality is so moving and persuasive, that when we visit the Colombian Atlantic coast, just as the rural South of the United States or the dusty towns of Mexico, what we see, instead of the real world, is the presence of his art, and then we say: "This is Macondo". These are masters that created a literary image of reality that was so powerful and swaying, so enticing and compelling, that we let ourselves be fooled to think that they have actually captured reality. They didn't. They presented a personal

interpretation of it. They chose a slice of the world and made it wholly believable and universal, and this way they communicated a truth of the human heart, one that lies hidden from view and is only accessible through that particular work of art.

Just to conclude, let me say that, as always, the wise are usually correct in these matters, and many have said that artists use reality as a springboard to launch their stories or paint their pictures, and then, ironically enough, when those works are completed, we see the world again yet not only in its appearance, but also in its essence. We should respect the reality that surrounds us but not be its slaves, for we are not historians but artists, and our job is to imagine and to dream, and maybe even, if we're lucky, to shed some light on the human condition. We must, in conclusion, be faithful to reality, but above all be faithful to ourselves, since only we can tell our own stories. Perhaps that is why it helps to remember the words of Borges, when he spoke at Harvard in 1967. "What does being a writer mean to me?" he asked. "It means simply being true to my imagination."

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