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The Presence of Myth in Borges, Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo and García Márquez

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The only critical text which attempts to deal directly with the mythical roots of magical realism is Graciela Ricci's *Realismo mágico y conciencia mítica en América Latina* (Magical Realism and Mythic Consciousness in Latin America, 1983).¹ Unlike Seymour Menton in his *Historia verdadera del realismo mágico* (*True History of Magical Realism*, 1998)² she accepts both the 'marvelousness' which is alleged to be inherent in external reality and the marvelousness which derives from the act of perception on the part of a certain category of viewers. Following Carpentier, in his famous prologue to *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*, 1949) she affirms that the elements which compose the former are especially prominent in Latin America. But it is the latter which is her main concern; for she contends that the particular form of perception which Carpentier includes under the heading of 'fé' (faith) is in fact a special form of insight 'un tipo de conocimiento sapiencial' (a kind of cognitive knowledge, p. 32), even a 'percepción de la Realidad Nouménica' (perception of Noumenal Reality; Ricci, p. 33). She goes on to assert that this special faculty is deeply rooted in the collective Latin American psyche and manifests itself most visibly in magical-realist narrative. We are left, then, with the notion of a culture-specific pattern of writing in which certain myths are used to bring forth hidden truths. This is simply affirmed as a mystique, that is, without proof, and should not be taken at face value. An inspection of magical-realist narrative reveals something quite different: the mythical elements incorporated into it are not normally there for any truths intrinsic to the myths themselves. On the contrary, they are devices employed by the writers in question to function as a relatively new and effective way of expressing their own attitudes and ideas. This is a crucial distinction.

¹ Graciela Ricci, *Realismo mágico y conciencia mítica en América Latina* (Mila: CELA, 1983).

² Seymour Menton, *Historia verdadera del realismo mágico* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998).

Jorge Luis Borges

On this basis one would normally expect that the myths which the Latin American magical-realist authors make use of would be borrowed from specifically Latin American (presumably indigenous or popular) sources. But this is not always the case. Depending on how comprehensive a view of magical realism one chooses to take, there are really three kinds of myth which come into play: Classical, Christian and indigenous Latin American. Consideration of the first raises the vexed question of whether Borges can or should be classified as a magical-realist writer. Discussion of this issue remains inconclusive. But it is clear that only the narrowest definition of magical realism, such as that of Camayd-Freixas,³ which relates it almost exclusively to the magico-mythical outlook of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, could exclude him completely. In fact he has been associated with the movement since the term magical realism was originally popularized in Latin American Studies in 1955 by Ángel Flores.⁴ The reason is obvious: whether we accept that the 'marvelous' elements of magical realism inhere in reality itself, American or otherwise, or whether we see them as deriving from a certain form of perception, or as merely improbable and sometimes supernatural, we can find them in Borges's stories. His relationship to magical realism rests on his view that, in a world which we are not programmed to understand 'toda estrafalaria cosa es posible' (anything, however outlandish, is possible; *Discusión, Discussion 1932 O.C.*, p. 238).⁵ One of the most obvious examples appears at the end of 'El Sur' in *Ficciones (Fictions, 1944)*. Menton, in the second chapter of his 1998 book, 'Los cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges ¿fantásticos o mágicorealistas?' (Jorge Luis Borges's Short Stories: Are They Fantastic or Magical-Realist?), totally fails to understand the mythic stature of the old gaucho who helps Dahlman to make his final and probably fatal choice by throwing him a knife with which to fight the young red-neck who has insulted him. He is not simply an improbable or unexpected onlooker: his *chiripá* and *botas de potro*, items of traditional gaucho dress unthinkable in twentieth-century Argentina, and the description of him as 'como fuera del tiempo' (as if outside time) mark him as figuring the myth of Argentine-ness which is crucial to the level of interpretation of the story which concerns Dahlman's choice between his German and Argentine roots. A somewhat less strong case might be made for the mythicization of Cruz in 'Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz' (Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz) in *El Aleph (The Aleph, 1949)* in the light of Borges's obvious intention to relate him to a prominent aspect of the myth of an Argentine national character, as he explains in 'Nuestro pobre individualismo' (Our Poor Individualism) in *Otras inquisiciones (Other Inquisitions, O.C. 1974, pp. 658-9)*.

³ Erik Camayd-Freixas, *Realismo mágico y primitivismo* (Lanham, New York & Oxford: University Press of America, 1998).

⁴ Ángel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction', *Hispania*, 38 (1955), 187-92.

⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas 1923-1972* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974).

It is not necessary for the myths employed by the Latin American magical-realists to be so intrinsically Latin American. Both Borges and Carpentier also use Classical myths. A notable case in the former's work is 'La Casa de Asterión' (The House of Asterion) in *El Aleph*, which uses the myth of the Minotaur to interpret in this case, not so much Latin American reality, but the state of the universe. It has been argued, notably by Alazraki, that Asterión represents Everyman and his labyrinth the world.⁶ But I have suggested elsewhere that the details do not fit.⁷ Rather, Borges seems to be using the myth of the Minotaur to explore the loneliness, misery and self-hatred of those who consciously choose evil and destruction as a way to give direction to their lives. Thus the submissiveness of Asterión to Theseus presents in mythical guise the fragile foundations on which dedication to evil and violence (in Borges's opinion) ultimately rests. More interestingly perhaps, the story contains an unexpected shift from Classical mythology to a Redemption myth presented via references to the Bible and to the Lord's Prayer. But Theseus's slaughter of the Minotaur shows that Borges has inverted the myth, as Asturias also does in *El Señor Presidente* (*Mr President*, 1946), Rulfo in *Pedro Páramo* (1955), Roa Bastos in *Hijo de hombre* (*Son of Man*, 1960) and Donoso in *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell has no Limits*, 1966). We must also notice Borges's use, in some stories, including 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' (The Garden of Forking Paths, *Ficciones*), 'La muerte y la brújula' (Death and the Compass, *Ficciones*), 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' (Theme of the Traitor and the Hero, *Ficciones*) and 'El inmortal' (The Immortal, *El Aleph*) of the myth of circular time, which was to reappear in García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967). Not all of the above-mentioned texts qualify as magical-realist. What they illustrate is that magical-realist works share with others the use of myth, not only as a vehicle for commentary, but also as a structuring principle of the narrative.

Alejo Carpentier

Carpentier, as we have suggested, does not always use magical realism in the same way. In 'Viaje a la semilla' (Journey Back to the Source) a genuinely supernatural event takes place. But in *El reino de este mundo* the events which nourish one of the most astonishing rebellions in history are rooted in something else: the collective faith of the blacks in a wider dimension of reality than Western rationalism accepts. In Haiti, Carpentier was suddenly struck, not so much by the marvelousness of what he saw around him in 1943, but by the marvelousness of Haitian history in the period of the French Revolution and the rise to power of Henri Christophe. Part of the magical realism of *El reino de este mundo* derives simply from Carpentier's evocation of this astonishingly improbable process.

⁶ Jaime Alazraki, 'Thön y Asterión: metáforas epistemológicas', in *Jorge Luis Borges. El escritor y la crítica* (Madrid: Taurus, 1976), pp. 183–200.

⁷ *Borges's Narrative Strategy* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), p. 5.

But a second dimension of magical realism in the novel arises from his presentation of the magico-mythical as a major element in the dynamic, which drove the process forward. Mackandal, from being a crippled slave, is transformed into a *haugán*, a miracle-working representative of the black divinities, who, the blacks believe, save him from being burned alive. The Mackandal-myth, illustrating the superiority of the 'viviente cosmogonía del negro' (living cosmogony of the negro)⁸ over the beliefs of the whites, operates after his death to ensure the triumph of the slave revolt. Once more, this is not a case of a myth that is featured in the narrative because of its expression of some deeper truth. In fact Carpentier is at pains to insist that Mackandal actually does suffer the fate that his followers believe he escaped; the myth is an illusion. Carpentier makes use of it to illustrate the important role often played by collective faith, even when it is without foundation, in bringing about historical change.

By far the most important example of the inter-connection of magical realism and myth in Carpentier's work is to be found in *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*, 1953). Like Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, Carpentier's novel incorporates a quest which can be seen in terms of Classical mythology. If Juan Preciado can be perceived as a Telemachus-figure, in *Los pasos perdidos* we can recognize a Jason in the narrator, when early in the story, in Mouche's study, he mentions Jason's ship, the Argo. Vassar, in a cogent study, has identified allusions to four other specific Greek myths in the novel: the Sisyphus story, the tale of Prometheus, the *Odyssey* journey and the myth of Orpheus.⁹ It is not surprising that although Camayd-Freixas includes Carpentier as one of only four writers he is prepared to accept as true magical-realists, he ignores *Los pasos perdidos*: it does not reflect the primitive outlook of Indians, blacks and rural peasants which he regards as the only valid criterion for belonging to the movement. Once more, as Vassar correctly understands, it is not simply a case of identifying parallels, interesting as these are; the real question is one of function. As we have seen, one important function of myth in magical-realist narrative is to provide a structural principle. Barry sees the mythical past figured forth in the *Odyssey* as providing the basic structural pattern in *Los pasos perdidos*.¹⁰ But it is the other function, that of acting as a method of commentary, bringing out the deeper meaning of the novel, that Vassar emphasizes. At times, she argues, the treatment of myth in the novel seems to postulate a circularity in which 'the cycle not only traps man, but also destroys him'. But at other times 'myth, rather than being a destructive force, is perceived as that which is being destroyed' (p. 216). Recognizing, along with a number of other critics, that Carpentier, far from accepting a repetitive, cyclic vision of history, believed in a slow upward spiral of progress, she concludes that the message conveyed by the treatment of myth in *Los pasos perdidos*

⁸ Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Santiago de Chile: Universitaria, 1969), p. 87.

⁹ Anne Vassar, 'The Function of Greek Myth in Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*', *Neophilologus*, 76 (1992), 212-23.

¹⁰ John Barry, 'Tiempo mítico en la novela contemporánea', *Explicación de Textos Literarios*, 11.2 (1982-83), 69-79 (pp. 73-4).

is that 'Modern humanity may not be completely free from the mythic cycle, but it is not operating in a totally closed system where myths are destined to exact repetition' (p. 221). This is one of the clearest accounts of the role of myth in a specific magical-realist novel that we possess.

Miguel Ángel Asturias

In the case of Asturias, we have to distinguish between his use of mythological elements for explicit social and existential commentary, as in *El Señor Presidente* (1946) and his use of Central American mythology in *Hombres de maíz* (*Men of Maize*, 1949) and *Mulata de tal* (*A Certain Mulatto Woman*, 1963). Whether we are prepared to accept *El Señor Presidente* as a magical-realist novel or not depends very largely on the degree to which we think that in it Asturias depicts a Central American dictatorship in magico-mythical terms. Before the crucial articles of Yepes Boscán and Osorio it was possible to see *El Señor Presidente* basically as a novel of protest against presidential tyranny.¹¹ But the work of these two critics and others (such as Verdugo and Walker) has totally altered the interpretation of the work from that of one more protest against brutal power to that of an allegory of the human condition.¹² The central structuring myths of the novel are those of Tohil, a non-redemptive, cruel and bloodthirsty tribal God of Central America, and the myth of Lucifer, which, in a world dominated by Tohil, is ironically reversed. The figure of El Pelele ('INRI-idiota'; INRI-idiot) is clearly intended to parody that of Christ, just as Cara de Angel's fate parodies that of Lucifer. While the above-mentioned critics are not specifically concerned with the work as magical-realist, the mythical elements that they identify, together with the work's general atmosphere, link it closely with magical realism.

El Señor Presidente is, in fact, the first major novel to illustrate Camayd-Freixas's assertion that 'El arte de Carpentier y Asturias, como más tarde el de Rulfo y García Márquez, descubre en las funciones del mito posibles confluencias de lo autóctono y lo universal' (The art of Carpentier and Asturias, as later on that of Rulfo and García Márquez, discovers in the myth possible convergences of the autochthonous and the universal, p. 11). His affirmation on the same page that this constitutes an 'americanismo de la forma' (americanism of form) is, however, only half-true, since the myths the magical realists make use of include Classical and biblical ones. But what a mythical reading of *El Señor Presidente* fully confirms is that in magical realism it is normally not what the myths are, but what they are

¹¹ Nelson Osorio, 'Lenguaje narrativo y estructura significativa de *El Señor Presidente* de Asturias', *Escritura* (Caracas), 5/6 (1978), 99-156; Guillermo Yepes-Boscán, 'Asturias, un pretexto del mito', *Aportes*, 8 (1968), 100-16.

¹² Iber Verdugo, 'El Señor Presidente, lectura estructural', in Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente, Obras completas* (Paris and Mexico: Klincksieck and Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978), III, pp. clv-ccxii; John Walker, 'The Role of the Idiot in Asturias' *El Señor Presidente*, *Romance Notes*, 12 (1970), 1-6.

used for, that matters. Even when in *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal* autochthonous myths are employed to represent a pre-modern outlook and render it interesting and comprehensible to the modern reader, introducing him or her to the otherness of native Latin Americans as part of the area's marvelousness, there still emerges, as Prieto insists, a blend of 'Mayan mythology, surrealist rhetoric, and, above all, [Asturias's] keenly developed sociopolitical consciousness'.¹³ Similarly, Gerald Martin, in the section on myth in his comprehensive study of *Hombres de maíz*, concludes that 'Asturias, al tratar los mitos, pretende enseñarnos las relaciones materiales entre la evolución de los mitos y el desarrollo de la sociedad' (Asturias, when he handles myths, attempts to reveal to us the material relationships between the evolution of the myths and social development).¹⁴

Juan Rulfo

Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), which is sometimes compared to Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* because of the mythical presentation of the two central figures, confirms what we have seen so far. The principal difference between Rulfo on the one hand and Asturias and Carpentier on the other is that while the latter relate some of the mythical elements in the relevant parts of their work to the indigenous Indian outlook or to that of the Caribbean blacks, Rulfo situates them simply in rural Jalisco. Once more we can identify the presence of Classical, biblical and local myths. Thus Camayd-Freixas's contention that Rulfo resolves the contradiction he sees in Carpentier and Asturias, between a cultured narrator and the primitive outlook of the characters, falls to the ground: the mythical substructure of the novel is just as indebted to Western culture as was the case in the work of the other two novelists. But there is no need to postulate a contradiction: the autochthonous mythical elements provide an Americanist dimension to the texts while the Classical and biblical ones provide a more universal one.

Like the President in *El Señor Presidente*, *Pedro Páramo* represents a myth of omnipotence. This has been interpreted by Ferrer Chivite and others in terms of the almighty (oppressive) Mexican state, i.e. as the mythicization of a historical situation.¹⁵ But, equally, there are other levels of myth involved. Given Paz's assertion in *El laberinto de la soledad* (p. 18) that all Mexican history is dominated by a search for 'filiación' (filiation), Juan Preciado's quest can be seen as a search for a mythic Mexican national identity.¹⁶ Carlos Fuentes in *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (*The New Spanish American Novel*, p. 16) has noticed

¹³ René Prieto, *Miguel Angel Asturias: Archeology of Return* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 249.

¹⁴ 'Estudio general' in Miguel Angel Asturias, *Hombres de maíz, Obras completas* (Paris and Mexico: Klincksieck and Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981), IV, pp. xxi-cxxlv (p. cxxlii).

¹⁵ Manuel Ferrer Chivite, *El laberinto de México de/en Juan Rulfo* (Mexico: Novarro, 1972).

¹⁶ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982).

obvious links with Greek mythology.¹⁷ The notion of the dead surviving as 'ánimas en pena' (souls in torment) is borrowed from popular mythology. Above all, George Freeman (p. 68) has identified in the pivotal episode of the incestuous couple in the centre of the novel 'sugerencias que se relacionan con el relato bíblico de la caída de la gracia del hombre' (suggestions that are related to the biblical story of man's fall from grace).¹⁸ Like *El Señor Presidente*, *Pedro Páramo* incorporates a mythico-religious metaphor of the human condition. But it is a metaphor that parodies Christian beliefs by inverting them.¹⁹ Juan Preciado's return to Comala, which he thinks of as green and fertile under his father's rule, plainly alludes to man's search for a loving, fatherly God presiding over a lost edenic existence. What he finds instead is a hell dominated by a cruel and vengeful, all powerful, God-figure, inhabited by lost souls for whom even death brings no peace, and by an incestuous Adam-and-Eve couple who represent a parody of the Genesis-myth. Whereas the Christian conception is that of a God of love, Pedro Páramo is ironically pictured as a God yearning for love but denied it. Whereas God is thought of in the West as sending his only son to redeem men by sacrificing his life for them, Miguel Páramo is seen as a rapist and ne'er-do-well, and Pedro is murdered by another of his sons in a transparent reference to the Death of God. Once the mythic substructure of the novel is understood, it ceases to be the work viewed by Mexicanist critics as an unconvincing Beauty-and-the-Beast story transferred to a pseudo-realistic Mexican rural setting and tricked out with gimmickry borrowed from the Mexican cult of death. Instead it incorporates, like *El Señor Presidente*, a parodic mythico-religious metaphor of the Human Condition.

Gabriel García Márquez

Almost all critics who have dealt with the presence of myth in magical realism have recognized in García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* the work in which that presence is most obtrusive and developed. On the one hand, it operates to challenge a positive vision of Columbian and by extension Latin American history by reducing it to a succession of repetitive cycles. As Lucila Mena (p. 131) puts it: 'La linealidad de la historia desemboca en la circularidad del mito' (the linearity of history leads into the circularity of myth).²⁰ On the other hand, once more by incorporating biblical elements, it attempts to confer universal significance on the story of Macondo. Camayd-Freixas (p. 273) suggests that the net

¹⁷ Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (Mexico: Mortiz, 1972).

¹⁸ George Freeman, 'La caída de la gracia: clave arquetípica de *Pedro Páramo*', in *La narrativa de Juan Rulfo*, ed. Joseph Sommers (Mexico: Sepsetentas, 1974), pp. 67-87.

¹⁹ See Donald L. Shaw, 'Inverted Christian Imagery and Symbolism in Modern Spanish American Fiction', *Romance Studies*, 10 (1987), 71-82.

²⁰ Lucila Mena, *La función de la historia en 'Cien años de soledad'* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 1979).

result is to present the reader of *Cien años de soledad* with examples of 'el mito degradado' (degraded myth). But this is not quite accurate. Myth in García Márquez's novel is no more 'degraded' than it is in *El Señor Presidente* or *Pedro Páramo*. What Camayd-Freixas seems to be referring to is the now familiar process by which magical-realist authors use mythical elements to express, in this case, a negative vision of reality.

Where we see this emerge prominently at an earlier date is in 'Los funerales de la Mamá Grande' (Big Mama's Funeral, 1962) in which García Márquez employs the death of the mythicized figure of la Mamá Grande to depict the end of the feudal era in Colombian history. The magical-realist dimension of the story is created by the apparently straight-faced enunciation by the narrator of the incredible power and wealth of La Mamá, which are believed to extend to the ownership of every telegraph pole in the country, all present and future water-rights and even the regulation of the sunshine. The mythical figure thus evoked is then carnivalized for purposes of socio-political commentary. But, as in *Cien años de soledad*, behind the hilarity lies a deep and bitter pessimism. La Mamá and her unequalled patrimony have passed away, but it will take centuries to clear up the mess her passing has left behind.

This is a specifically Americanist myth. But in *Cien años de soledad* the frame of reference is greatly extended. González Echevarría (p. 19) writes:

It seems clear that myth appears in the novel in the following guises: (1) there are stories that resemble classical or biblical myths, most notably the Flood, but also Paradise, the Seven Plagues, the Apocalypse, and the proliferation of the family, which with its complicated genealogy, has an Old Testament ring to it; (2) there are characters who are reminiscent of mythical heroes: José Arcadio Buendía, who is a sort of Moses; Rebecca, who is like a female Perseus; Remedios, who ascends in a flutter of white sheets in a scene that is suggestive, not just of the Ascension of the Virgin, but more specifically of the popular renditions of that event in religious prints; (3) certain stories have a general mythic character in that they contain supernatural elements, as in the case just mentioned, and also when José Arcadio's blood returns to Ursula; (4) the beginning of the whole story, which is found, as in myth, in a tale of violence and incest. All four, of course, co-mingle, and because *Cien años de soledad* tells a tale of foundations or origins, the entire novel has a mythical air about it. No single myth or mythology prevails.²¹

Nor does any interpretation of the mythical elements in the novel prevail. Everything depends on the meaning we ascribe to the Apocalypse at the end: the Rushing, Mighty Wind that carries Macondo away from the face of the earth. To some critics what matters is that the biblical myths, which structure the text, do not involve a myth of final Redemption. Mena, Williamson and others see history

²¹ Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive. A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

as finally devoured by myth.²² Gerald Martin, on the other hand, insists that the myths exist in the minds of the characters, rather than in the mind of the author and that critics fail to differentiate between the two.²³ García Márquez is on record as stating 'la realidad es también los mitos de la gente, es las creencias, es sus leyendas' (reality is also people's myths, it is their beliefs, it is their legends; quoted in Kline, p. 125).²⁴ It can be argued that when Gabriel leaves Macondo at the end, he escapes from its mythical mentality and achieves what Williamson (p. 60) calls 'salvation'.

Clearly, myth has at least three important functions in magical-realist narratives. It offers, in certain cases a novel, exotic, primitive vision of reality in the context of what Camayd-Freixas (p. 215) calls 'América como encuentro imprevisto de culturas' (America as an unforeseen meeting-place of cultures). But behind this we perceive its use by the various authors to express their outlook on aspects of Latin American reality, including myths of nationality and mythic representations of socio-political or historical forces for purposes of interpretation, criticism or protest. Finally, we find myths employed to express the author's wider view of the Human Condition generally.

²² Edwin Williamson, 'Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*', in *Gabriel García Márquez. New Readings*, eds Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 45-63.

²³ Gerald Martin, 'On "Magical" and Social Realism in García Márquez', in *Gabriel García Márquez. New Readings*, pp. 95-116.

²⁴ Carmenza Kline, *Los orígenes del relato: los lazos entre ficción y realidad en la obra de Gabriel García Márquez* (Bogotá: Ceiba, 1992).