

A Contemporary Fairy Tale: García Márquez' "El rastro de tu sangre en la nieve"

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Like most of García Márquez' stories and novels, the short story "El rastro de tu sangre en la nieve" integrates elements from a variety of sources, but the story's principal intertextual element is the fairy tale. Although the titular image of blood on the snow comes from "Little Snow-White," the story is a subtle recreation of "Little Briar-Rose," better known as "Sleeping Beauty." Well aware of the symbolic import of fairy tales, García Márquez exploits that tradition to create a contemporary fairy tale replete with symbolic meaning. His fairy tale explores the cultural origins of individual psychology and culturally conditioned modes of being.

Images that confirm the story's fairy-tale matrix are in evidence throughout the text, starting, of course, with the title itself. In "Little Snow-White," a queen pricks her finger while sewing, and three drops of blood fall upon the snow (126). In "El rastro" Nena Daconte pricks her finger on a thorn in a bouquet of roses she receives from the Colombian ambassador in Madrid: "[Y] luego recibió las rosas. Al cogerlas se pinchó el dedo con una espina del tallo . . ." "[And] then she accepted the roses. When she took them she pricked her finger on a thorn on the stem' (225). Later, when she tries in vain to stop the flow of blood by putting her hand outside the car window in the freezing air, she makes this comment: " 'Si alguien nos quiere encontrar será muy fácil,' dijo con su encanto natural. 'Solo tendrá que seguir el rastro de mi sangre en la nieve' " 'If anyone wants to find us, it will be easy,' she said with her natural charm, 'they will only have to follow the trail of my blood in the snow.' (229-30). In "Little Briar-Rose," a fifteen-year-old princess pricks her finger on a spindle and falls asleep for one hundred years. The consequence of Nena's pricking of her finger is a

death from which there is no awakening. Death or a deathlike sleep is also prominent in "Little Snow-White." She is revived when the dwarfs remove the strangling lace (130) and the poisonous comb from her hair (131), and the prince accidentally dislodges the poisonous piece of apple from the throat (134). Nena's failure to be saved signifies a degradation of the "myth," of which more later.

The repeated emphasis given to Nena Daconte and Billy Sánchez de Avila's distinguished ancestry, to their families' affluence—and influence—is designed to place the story in the tradition of the fairy tale, in which the protagonists are often royal, wealthy, and powerful. Despite Billy Sánchez' delinquent conduct, the narrator makes it clear that both his and Nena's families belonged to a small clique that had ruled the roost in Cartagena de Indias since colonial times: "... [P]ues ambos pertenecían a la estirpe provinciana que manejaba a su arbitrio el destino de la ciudad desde los tiempos de la colonia..." 'Both belong to families that had dominated the city's affairs since colonial times' (221). Nena's surname, Daconte, is composed of *da*, meaning "of" in Portuguese and *conte*, meaning "count" in Italian, further associating her with nobility. But *conte* also means "story" in French so that her full name could also be translated as "Little Girl of the Story." Another detail pointing to the story's imitation of fairy tales is found in the impression Nena receives as she and Billy drive through the moonlit darkness of the French countryside. "El fulgor de la luna se filtraba a través de la neblina, y las siluetas de los castillos entre los pinos parecían de cuentos de hadas" 'The moonlight filtered through the fog, and the outlines of the castles in the pine trees had the aura of fairy tales' (227).

Both characters possess the perfect youthful beauty of the fairy-tale prince and princess. When Billy breaks into Nena's *cabaña*, she "vio parado frente a ella al bandolero más hermoso que se podía concebir" 'saw standing in front of her the most handsome gang member imaginable' (221). As they cross the French border on a stormy night a guard who initially had rudely answered their query as to where to find a pharmacy abruptly changes his tune when he chances to glance at the beautiful young woman: "Pero luego se fijó con atención en la muchacha que se chupaba el dedo herido envuelta en el destello de los visones naturales, y debió confundirla con una aparición mágica en aquella noche de espantos, porque al instante cambió de humor" 'But then he noticed the girl in the beautiful mink stole who was sucking the injured finger, and he must have mistaken her for a magical

apparition that frightful night, because suddenly his mood changed' (219). Note the phrase "aparición mágica," which further contributes to the atmosphere of a fairy tale. Later, Billy asks himself if "la criatura radiante" 'the radiant creature' sleeping at his side is as happy as he is (220).

Nena's beauty, even after her death, parallels that of Sleeping Beauty and that of Little Snow-White in death. Those who managed to see Nena's embalmed body "siguieron repitiendo durante muchos años que no habían visto nunca una mujer más hermosa, ni viva ni muerta" 'kept on repeating for many years that they had never seen a more beautiful woman, dead or alive' (244).

The image of the car, the latest model Bentley, which Billy receives as a wedding gift from his father, contributes further to the atmosphere of magic characteristic of fairy tales. The narrator says that its "interior exhalaba un aliento de bestia viva" 'interior breathed like a live animal' (218). The Bentley seems to hypnotize Billy. When the ambassador attempts to show him the sights of Madrid, Billy "sólo parecía atento a la magia del coche" 'only seemed interested in the magic of the car' (226). The image of the car as a "bestia viva" 'live animal' is appropriate. Centaurlike, Billy is inseparable from the beast, driving more than eleven hours without stopping to rest.

It should come as no surprise that the master of "magical realism" should have recourse to fairy tales, in which the supernatural is paramount. After all, intertexts in the form of re-created myths are found throughout his writing. Moreover, critics and psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim have shown that, notwithstanding the entertainment value of fairy tales, they are charged with symbolic meaning and they function to educate their readers' perceptions and feelings. Critics have repeatedly confirmed the accuracy of García Márquez' declaration in his interview with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza that "the novel is reality represented through a secret code, a kind of conundrum about the world" (35). Presumably, this statement is meant to hold true for stories as well as novels.

Bettelheim provides an incisive account of the functions of fairy tales in his "Foreword" to *German Fairy Tales*:

Beginning in a setting akin to our most ordinary existence, fairy tales take us in a short and dramatic move to the very edge of the abyss, as does any true exploration of the meaning of life, of its deeper purpose, as does any serious effort to know ourselves that

penetrates beyond the surface of our being and reaches into the darker recesses of our mind, particularly those which we desire not to recognize. These are the aspects of our existence which threaten us most, which are likely to cause our troubles, but which endow our existence with some of the deepest meaning. This darkness within ourselves is what we need most to become acquainted with if we want to know ourselves. The fairy tale, having forced us to face evil and all the darkness within man, after having acquainted us with what we rather wish to avoid, serenely rescues us. In the course of the story, as we identify with its hero, we gain the ability to live a richer and more meaningful life on a much higher plane than the one on which we found ourselves at the story's beginning, where the hero, who is our mirror image, was forced to embark on his perilous voyage of self-discovery. (xii-xiii)

As suggested above, García Márquez' tale varies from this positive pattern. The hero or antihero fails to move to a higher plane of self-understanding.

Their more or less equal social status and their mutual sexual attraction notwithstanding, it becomes increasingly evident that the marriage between Billy and Nena is a tremendous mismatch. Nena is infinitely superior to Billy in refinement, education, practical sense, and self-possession. She is lucid and cosmopolitan, the product of an excellent education. Following the strongest impulse of the moment, he almost appears to be devoid of reasoning powers and self-control. Billy Sánchez is as common as his first two names suggest, and he is extremely provincial. The North American name Billy suggests several possibilities. First, it may include the North American male in the characteristics Billy represents. It is the diminutive form of William or Bill and hence is a means of suggesting Billy's immaturity. Think of Billy the Kid. Further, it is often associated in the United States with a lack of refinement, a certain coarseness. García Márquez would certainly remember Billy Carter, who sold his name to the brewer of Billy Beer.

Through juxtaposition, the novelist explores three modes of being: that of Billy Sánchez, that of Nena Daconte, and that of the French. In general, Billy dramatizes the Hispanic mode of being, and Nena, who has attended a Swiss school, exemplifies a synthesis of cultures. Billy's cultural shock in France throws in relief certain fundamental values of French culture.

Billy and Nena's honeymoon trip, which has as its point of departure the Caribbean city Cartagena de Indias and continues from Madrid to Paris, serves to dramatize certain cultural differences. As the antihero, Billy is the principal vehicle for the highlighting of these differences, albeit his conduct is also juxtaposed to that of Nena, whose role, at least in the last thirteen of the story's twenty-nine pages, is reduced to the narrator's "off-stage" reports. Nena's conduct, as reported by the narrator stands in significant contrast to Billy's.

Billy epitomizes a mode of being often associated with Hispanic culture, especially in the upbringing of Hispanic males. Since he is a juvenile delinquent before he meets Nena, the description of his mode of being is somewhat exaggerated, but his characterization does not fall into inverisimilitude. Society has failed to prepare him for life in the world into which he was born. Billy's inadequacy to cope with the world suggests that being privileged can be just as detrimental, just as inhibiting to healthful growth and the development of maturity, as being underprivileged.

Billy almost exclusively heeds what the Ortega y Gasset of *El tema de nuestro tiempo* called the "biological imperative." Invariably, as indicated above, he follows the strongest impulse of the moment, giving little or no consideration to reason and the consequences of his acts. If Billy's awareness of his feelings occurred within the framework of a philosophy of life that gave primacy to the body, it would be positive, but his conduct exists on the instinctual level, almost altogether lacking in foresight. What is missing in Billy's life is the counterforce of Ortega's "cultural imperative," making possible a synthesis: "la razón vital" 'vital reason.' The result is destructive of self and others.

Despite—and probably in his case, because of—his life of privilege and indulgence, he has not the faintest clue as to how to cope with life outside his protected circle of family and friends. In this respect, he is hardly better off than Cela's Pascual Duarte, another literary figure who follows the strongest impulse of the moment. As in Pascual's case, society has failed to equip Billy with the inner resources (he has an excess of material resources) to cope with the world. That Billy has been spoiled is evident in the narrator's comment, with respect to his father's gift of the Bentley. Billy, he writes, had "un papá con demasiados sentimientos de culpa y recursos de sobra para complacerlo" 'a father with too many guilt feelings and with more than enough financial means to please him' (219). Later, we read that Billy and Nena

made love “en los carros deportivos con que el papá de Billy Sánchez trataba de apaciguar sus propias culpas” ‘in the sports cars with which Billy Sánchez’ father tried to assuage his guilt feelings’ (223).

The violent circumstances of Billy and Nena’s first meeting on the beach, when he, as a gang member, breaks open her *cabaña* door with the intention of raping her, is further evidence of self-indulgence, deriving from having been indulged both by his immediate and his extended family. Billy has been spoiled not only by his father but also by society in general. He is at a loss to understand the parking regulations in Paris because as the scion of a distinguished family he is unaccustomed to such restraints in his own culture: “Tantas artimañas racionalistas resultaban incomprensibles para un Sánchez de Avila de los más acendrados, que apenas dos años antes se había metido en un cine de barrio con el automóvil oficial del alcalde mayor, y había causado estragos de muerte ante los policías impávidos” ‘All these rationalistic stratagems were incomprehensible to a *thoroughbred* Sánchez de Avila, who scarcely two years before had driven into a movie theater in the mayor’s official car, and had wreaked deadly havoc right before the eyes of undaunted policemen’ (236; emphasis added). The suggestion that Billy is one of many overindulged young men of his society’s upper class generalizes his case, making it emblematic of a cultural pattern.

The self-inflicted wound that results from Billy’s impetuous slamming of his fist against the *cabaña* door, when Nena’s cool wit frustrates his criminal intentions, anticipates the self-destructiveness that patterns his conduct in general. His self-indulgence throughout most of *El rastro* takes the form of an obsession with the new Bentley that results in his driving from Madrid to Paris with only perfunctory and belated attention to Nena’s bleeding finger. His centaurlike inseparability from the “bestia viva” symbolizes his debasement, his inability to detach himself from, and control, his instincts (Cirlot 40).

Billy’s inability to rise above his instincts, to order them through reason and foresight is culturally conditioned. Like Pascual Duarte, whose parents also neglected his education, Billy’s values reflect the vulgar values of the society in which he has grown up or, more accurately, in which he has failed to grow up. Echoing Pascual, who revealingly once exclaimed: “. . . [L]a pesca siempre me pareció pasatiempo poco de hombres . . .” ‘Fishing always seemed to me to be a pastime little suited to men . . .’ (32), when Nena, concerned that her husband has driven far too long without eating, attempts to give him a

piece of candied orange, he refuses this modest nourishment with the utterance, "Los machos no comen dulces" 'Males don't eat sweets' (228). Significantly, Billy chooses the word "machos" instead of "hombres," reducing the matter to the biological level. Later, when Nena considers offering to relieve Billy at the steering wheel, she refrains from doing so because of his prejudice on this matter: "Nena Daconte hubiera querido ayudar a su marido en el volante, pero ni siquiera se atrevió a insinuarlo, porque él le había advertido desde la primera vez en que salieron juntos que no hay humillación más grande para un hombre que dejarse conducir por su mujer" 'Nena Daconte would have liked to have helped her husband at the wheel, but she did not even dare to suggest it, because he had warned her from the first time that they went out together that there is no greater humiliation for a man than to let himself be driven by his wife' (228).

Billy's unthinking reflection of the prejudices of his culture is in vivid contrast to Nena's openness and cross-cultural education. One implication of Nena's ability to play the tenor saxophone is her willingness, despite the raised eyebrows of her acquaintances and her family's annoyance that a young woman of her "alcurnia" 'lineage' should play a vulgar instrument traditionally reserved for men (222). Unlike Billy, to some extent, Nena has freed herself from the role expectations of her culture. She has further freed herself from such expectations through her Swiss education by means of which she has become fluent in, and reads, in four languages (220). Desperately bored while waiting to enter the hospital to see Nena, Billy, who has never finished reading a single book (241), opens Nena's suitcases in search of reading material, "pero los únicos que encontró en las maletas de su esposa eran en idiomas distintos del castellano" 'but the only ones he found in his wife's suitcases were in languages other than Spanish' (241). This revelation further dramatizes the mismatch of a marriage between a provincial man and a cosmopolitan woman in Hispanic culture, which habitually privileges men over women in virtually every aspect of the relations between the sexes, regardless of individual circumstances.

While Billy is at a loss as to how to reach Nena in the French hospital, and disconcerted because of his inability to fathom the French way of being, Nena, despite her fear of losing consciousness, is serene and lucid from the moment she enters the hospital until the end: "Hasta el último instante había estado lúcida y serena, dio instrucciones para que buscaran a su marido en el hotel Plaza Athenée, donde tenían una

habitación reservada, y dio los datos para que se pusieran en contacto con sus padres” ‘Up to the last instant she had been lucid and serene; she gave them instructions about how to look for her husband in the Plaza Athenée Hotel, and she gave them information on how to get in contact with her parents’ (242-43). So disoriented is Billy that the simple solution of proceeding to the hotel in which they had reservations does not even occur to him. This would have ensured the hospital’s being able to reach him and advise him of Nena’s condition. Instead, he buries himself in a cheap hotel near the hospital ensuring just the opposite. His futile attempt to force his way into the hospital, typical of his conduct in Cartagena de Indias, in Paris lands him on the street outside the hospital door in an unceremonious manner. Nena’s serenity and lucidity in the most tremendous crisis a human being is called on to undergo reveals her superiority to her husband, who is simply unprepared in terms of education and maturity to adapt to new circumstances, and especially to the circumstances of a different culture.

In the end, it is evident that Billy has learned nothing.¹ His reaction to Nena’s death and his inability to reach her before she dies fits the same mold as his reaction to frustration when he first met Nena. He broke open her *cabaña* door with his chain and then injured his fist when Nena’s lucid coolness frustrates his intention of raping her. After the Asian doctor informs Billy of the events surrounding Nena’s death, the bereaved husband can only think of smashing someone with a chain:

El médico asiático que puso Billy Sánchez al corriente de la tragedia quiso darle unas pastillas calmantes en la sala del hospital, pero él las rechazó. Se fue sin despedirse, sin nada que agradecer, pensando que lo único que necesitaba con urgencia era encontrar a alguien a quien romperle la madre a cadenas para desquitarse de su desgracia.

The Asian doctor who brought Billy Sánchez up-to-date on the tragedy tried to give him some tranquilizers in the hospital lounge, but he refused to take them. He left without saying goodbye, without anything to feel grateful for, thinking that the only thing he urgently needed to do was to find someone to rip apart with a chain in order to avenge himself for his misfortune. (244)

In this respect García Márquez's tale diverges from the typical fairy tale in which the hero faces hardships and terror, but in the end overcomes them, symbolically undergoing a process of maturation that enables him (or her) to survive and even thrive in life (live happily ever after). Bettelheim's cogent explanation of the function of fairy tales in terms of reader response is certainly applicable to the protagonists themselves. Billy is taken to what Bettelheim describes as the "very edge of the abyss," but he fails to gain greater knowledge of himself, to move to a superior level of understanding and conduct. Billy cannot transcend a mode of conduct based on instinct and feeling, unlike the fairy-tale heroes Bettelheim so convincingly explains:

The eventual rescue, complete restoration, and elevation of the hero to a superior existence is characteristic of fairy tales because as works of art their purpose is to acquaint us with the fact that not only is life difficult and often entails dangerous struggles but also that only through the mastery of succeeding crises in our existence can we eventually find our true self. Having achieved this, we then no longer need to live in fear of our childish anxieties.

One might even say that the stories tell the child that he will succeed only because hardships force him to develop his ingenuity, initiative, and independence. (xvi)

At a certain moment, aggrieved by his failure to enter the hospital to be with Nena, Billy decides to proceed like an adult: "Aquella tarde, dolorido por el escarmiento, Billy Sánchez empezó a ser adulto. Decidió como lo hubiera hecho Nena Daconte, acudir a su embajador" 'That afternoon, smarting from the lesson he had learned, Billy Sánchez began to be an adult. As Nena Daconte would have done, he decided to seek help from his ambassador' (238). However, he presents himself at the embassy so badly dressed that the Frenchified official who receives him in the ambassador's place simply cannot imagine that he is from a distinguished Colombian family and tells him that his only recourse is to wait until the regular visiting hours on Tuesday. The result is that he fails to learn of Nena's death even in time to attend her funeral. Then, as noted above, he reverts to his habitual, puerile mode of being. At the same time the difference that the knowledge that he was from a distinguished Colombian family would have made reveals a society built on injustice.

Transplanting an uneducated Spanish American, who exemplifies the raw prejudices of his culture, to France, enables García Márquez to dramatize some of the fundamental differences between Hispanic (specifically Spanish American) and French culture. Making the honeymoon trip, which originates in Cartagena de Indias, pass through Madrid on the way to Paris subtly reminds the reader of the principal source of Spanish-American culture. At the same time the drive through Spain and France creates opportunities for character and plot development with their attendant revelations and implications.

Nena is a victim of two inadequate modes of being. The French penchant for rational planning and order proves just as deadly as Billy's Hispanic improvisational style of life. Along with the spontaneity of the Hispanic style goes a blindness to consequences, while the French mode, which attempts a rational anticipation of consequences, is too rigid to take into account the turns and twists of life and individual differences. Moreover, along with the French inclination to reduce reality to what is rational and predictable goes a certain meanness of spirit, a niggardliness and lack of cordiality in human relations, suggesting that French rationalism and rigid adherence to principle may conceal a good dosage of indifference to other people.²

The contrast between Hispanic and French culture is evident from the moment Billy and Nena arrive at the French border, where the border guards show their irritation at having to interrupt their card game to attend to the travelers (218). Driving in Paris, Billy becomes nervous because of the din of horns and the insults the drivers shout to each other; when he is on the verge of getting out of his car to fight with another driver, "Nena logró convencerlo de que los franceses eran la gente más grosera del mundo, pero no se golpeaban nunca" 'Nena succeeded in convincing him that the French were the rudest people in the world, but that they never resort to fistfights' (230-31).³ Several passages suggest that the French are prone to niggardliness. Nena pointedly remarks that the generous beauty of the French countryside contrasts with the pettiness of the people who inhabit it: " 'No hay paisajes más bellos en el mundo,' decía, 'pero uno puede morir de sed sin encontrar a nadie que le dé gratis un vaso de agua' " 'These are the most beautiful landscapes in the world, she said, but you could die of thirst before finding anyone who would give you a free glass of water' (228). Also, because of this same stinginess, Nena brings her own soap and toilet paper to France, "porque en los hoteles de Francia nunca había jabón, y el papel de los retretes eran los periódicos de la semana

anterior cortados en cuadraditos y colgados de un gancho" 'because in French hotels there was never any soap, and the paper in the bathrooms was the newspapers of the previous week cut into little squares and hung on a hook' (228).

Further evidence of French stinginess is found in Billy's reaction to the mode of operation of the stairway and bathroom lights in his hotel:

A Billy Sánchez no le habría alcanzado la vida para descifrar los enigmas de ese mundo fundado en el talento para la cicatería. Nunca entendió el misterio de la luz de la escalera que se apagaba antes de que él llegara a su piso, ni descubrió la manera de volver a encenderla. Necesitó media mañana para aprender que en el rellano de cada piso había un cuartito con un excusado de cadena, y ya había decidido usarlo en las tinieblas cuando descubrió por casualidad que la luz se encendía al pasar el cerrojo por dentro, para que nadie la dejara encendida por olvido.

A lifetime would not have sufficed for Billy Sánchez to decipher the enigmas of that world based on a talent for stinginess. He never solved the mystery of the stairway light that went out before he could reach his floor, nor did he discover how to turn it on again. It took him a half a morning to learn that on the landing of each floor there was a little room with a chain toilet, and he had already decided to use it in the dark when he accidentally discovered that the light turned on when you locked the door from inside, so that no one would leave it on out of forgetfulness. (234)

Billy also learns that he must pay separately for use of a shower, whose water flow is centrally controlled and lasts only three minutes (234). The reader is led to perceive the contrasts between the two cultures not only in the phrase "no le habría alcanzado la vida para descifrar los enigmas de ese mundo," 'a lifetime would not have sufficed for him to decipher the enigmas of that world,' cited above, but also in Billy's adjustment to the shower arrangement: "Sin embargo, Billy Sánchez tuvo bastante claridad de juicio para comprender que *aquel orden tan distinto del suyo* era de todos modos mejor que la intemperie de invierno . . ." 'However, Billy Sánchez had sufficient presence of mind to understand that *the order of things so different from his* was at any

rate better than being exposed to the winter weather' (234-35; emphasis added).

The only cordial person they have contact with in France is the doctor who attends Nena when she enters the hospital's emergency room. Significantly, he is not of French origin, but a dark-complexioned person who speaks Spanish with a strange Asian accent (231-32). Like Nena, he is cosmopolitan, the product of a synthesis of cultures.

When Billy receives a ticket for failing to park his car on the other side of the street at the proper time, again, the reader is led to perceive the contrasts between the two cultures:

Tantas artimañas racionalistas resultaban incomprensibles para un Sánchez de Avila de los más acendrados, que apenas dos años antes se había metido en un cine de barrio con el automóvil oficial de alcalde mayor, y había causado estragos de muerte ante los policías impávidos.

All these rationalistic stratagems were incomprehensible to a thoroughbred Sánchez de Avila, who scarcely two years before had driven into a movie theater in the mayor's official car, and had wreaked deadly havoc right before the eyes of undaunted policemen. (236)

The phrase "artimañas racionalistas" 'rationalistic stratagems' is a pointed characterization of the French, while the phrase "de los más acendrados" implies that Billy typifies the essence of his culture. Obviously, what a young member of the Colombian aristocracy can get away with is not held up here for the reader's admiration.

Billy's failure to reach Nena in the hospital is partially the result of his own ineptitude, as indicated below, but the rigidity of the hospital's visitation policy poses a formidable obstacle to his success. Nena enters the hospital on a Tuesday and dies the following Thursday. Since the hospital permits visits only on Tuesdays, Billy must wait until the following Tuesday, when it is too late, to try to be with his wife. Characteristically, he attempts to force his way into the hospital, but is thrown out by a hospital guard. The point I wish to make here is that though Billy should have proceeded in a more civilized and rational manner, the hospital's visitation policy offers too few opportunities for visitation and is too rigid. It seems to be designed largely to protect the hospital personnel and, perhaps to some degree, the patients from the

inconveniences associated with visits. The hospital's visitation policy is directly placed within the framework of French rationalism when the Frenchified embassy official tells Billy that he has no choice but to wait until Tuesday:

Entendió la ansiedad de Billy Sánchez, pero le recordó, sin perder la dulzura, que estaba en *un país civilizado* cuyas normas estrictas se fundaban en los criterios más antiguos y sabios, al contrario de las Américas bárbaras donde bastaba con sobornar al portero para entrar en los hospitales. 'No, mi querido joven,' le dijo. No había más remedio que someterse *al imperio de la razón* y esperar hasta el martes.

He understood Billy Sánchez' anxiety, but he reminded him, without losing his gentle tone, that he was in *a civilized country* whose strict norms were based on the most ancient and wise criterias, just the opposite of the barbaric Americas where it sufficed to bribe a porter to get into a hospital. "No, my dear young man" he said to him. The only solution was to submit to *the rule of reason* and wait until Tuesday. (239; emphasis added)

Nena's death symbolizes the shortcomings of each of the two cultural modes of being, the inadequacy of each by itself fully to nourish and sustain life. Hence, we observe the gradual loss of her blood, the source of her life and a symbol of vitality, on the beautiful (like theory?) but cold and sterile snow. The "apenas perceptible" 'scarcely perceptible' (219) and "casi invisible" 'almost invisible' (229) wound corresponds to the subtle nature of the causes of Nena's death.

Implicitly, what is lacking is a synthesis of the two modes of being: the Hispanic, which is more or less Dionysian, and the French, which is basically Apollonian. A victim of the partial truths of each culture, Nena epitomizes such a synthesis. Her name itself, as indicated above, suggests four languages and is emblematic of her multicultural education. She is certainly capable of spontaneity and improvisation, but she is also well-educated, cosmopolitan, and lucid in her final crisis. In the contemporary world, knowledge of only one culture is simply a form of provincialism writ large. In this sense, Billy represents one form of provincialism, and the dominant French mode of being represents another type of provincialism. Nena, with her Swiss education and

mastery of four languages has been prepared, to use McLuhan's term, for life in the "global village."

Notwithstanding the breadth of Nena's cultural education and her lucidity, she is also attentive to her instinctual needs. Her courtship, lovemaking, and marriage to Billy attest to her vitality in this respect. Moreover, not only does her playing the saxophone show that she is willing to blur the differences between traditional sex roles, but it is also emblematic of her sensuality. She scandalizes her grandmother by playing the instrument "con la falda recogida hasta los muslos y las rodillas separadas, y con una sensualidad que no le parecía esencial para la música" 'with her skirt pulled up to her thighs and her legs apart, and with a sensuality that did not seem essential to the music' (222). It becomes evident that playing the saxophone (a phallic symbol?) is a kind of sublimation when the narrator asserts that "Nena Daconte se entregó a los amores furtivos con la misma devoción frenética que antes malgastaba en el saxofón . . ." 'Nena gave herself over to her secret love affairs with the same frenetic devotion that before she had wasted on the saxophone' (224). This suggests, of course, that Nena may have married the vulgar, but handsome and viril Billy Sánchez because of the strength of her own sexual drive. To this extent, then, she is a victim of her own passions.

The story is told by an omniscient, reliable narrator whose vantage point allows him, as if he had a time machine, to describe and dramatize various episodes in Nena and Billy's past lives that bear on the present. There are frequent flashbacks to scenes in their lives in Cartagena de Indias and comments on their relations with their parents. Within the framework of the flashbacks the narrator sometimes takes the reader even further into the past, as for example, when he refers to Nena's education in a private Swiss school and her mastery of four languages, or when, in another flashback, he describes the occasion in which Billy drove the mayor's car into a movie theater and killed a man. The transitions to the past are achieved in a subtle, natural manner inasmuch as they shed light on the characters' attitudes and deeds in the present. The presentation of episodes from the past function to underscore Nena and Billy's privileged upbringing, as well as to highlight the differences between them. On the symbolic level, the flashbacks serve to throw in relief the differences between Hispanic and French cultures.

Significantly, the novel's first scene takes place at the border between Spain and France, as the couple undertakes the drive to Paris.

Since the story is an exploration of the differences between the two

cultures that converge at the border, situating the action on the border between two countries is a stroke of genius. Moreover, the setting of the first episode at the *frontera* suggests the beginning of their lives together as a married couple; they have crossed the threshold to a new life together. The story, then, is structured in a way to maximize the comparisons and contrasts between the two cultures, as exemplified largely, but not exclusively, in Billy's way of being, and to reveal the superiority of Nena's cosmopolitan synthesis.

How, in general, do tone and implicit ideology of this story square with those of García Márquez' other writings? The pessimism implicit in Nena's death and Billy's inability to transcend the mentality of a juvenile gang member is attenuated by the glimmer of hope present in Nena's way of being, which her cosmopolitan upbringing made possible. Notwithstanding her clear superiority, she is victimized by a society that still systematically privileges males over females, however superior the latter may be. Although *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* also paints a dark picture of Hispanic culture, especially as exemplified in Church doctrine, again a glimmer of hope is present in Angela Vicario's ultimate liberation from the influence of her mother Pura, who epitomized the ideology culminating in Santiago's death. The pessimistic ending of "La increíble historia de lá inocente Eréndira y de su desalmada abuela," however, is not softened by any glimpse of salvation. The same can be said of *Cien años de soledad*, where the ending is explicitly pessimistic: the Buendía family is not to have a second chance. In contrast to such pessimism is the hopeful message of fulfillment and love of him who watches, waits, and struggles in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*.

Finally, one must view the pessimistic nature of much of García Márquez' writings within the framework of his purpose for writing in the first place. Despite his declared reasons for writing, such as, for example, to please his friends, he obviously writes to have a significant impact on his readers; he writes to lead his readers to experience life more vividly and thereby to gain a richer and clearer understanding of human affairs. Clearly, then, there is an underlying optimism in this hope of altering his readers' sensibilities. It was evident, too, in the novelist's Nobel address, in his comment on the length of time it took Europeans to develop democratic forms of government and open societies, that he believes that Spanish America needs more time to realize this goal. In my judgment, his writings are designed not only to entertain but also to be a significant force in the foreshortening of the

time needed for the development of such societies. If this is the case, then, in the last analysis, García Márquez' writings, taken as a whole, presuppose a deep, abiding faith in life, in the human ability to endure, not unlike that of Margarito Duarte in "La santa." Viewed in the context of his total endeavor, then, what at first glance appears to be pessimism, transforms into a measure of faith and hope.

Notes

1. I agree with Bárbara Mujica, in her excellent review of the entire collection of stories, that "Billy es más que un individuo, es el arquetipo del latinoamericano rico de clase alta" (62), but I diverge from her view on the matter of Billy's maturity. She states that his "búsqueda de un sentido de dirección es el primer paso de su madurez" (62). In my view, this was Billy's only step; in the end, he lapses back into his habitual immaturity.

2. This story certainly does not mark García Márquez' only characterization of French culture. In his conversations with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, the novelist evidently has in mind French readers when, in reply to his interlocutor's assertion that his European readers may have been unable to see the reality behind the magic of his stories, he asserts: "This is surely because their rationalism prevents them seeing that reality isn't limited to the price of tomatoes and eggs" (35). That he has in mind French readers becomes evident later, in his explanation of why *One Hundred Years of Solitude* sold better in England, Italy, and Spanish-speaking countries than in France: "[It is due] to the Cartesian tradition perhaps. I'm much closer to Rabelais' craziness than to Descartes' discipline, and in France Descartes gained the upper hand" (78).

3. The incident resembles the one in *La familia de Pascual Duarte* in which Pascual, recently arrived in Madrid, is astonished at the Madrilenians' ability to insult each other so passionately without resorting to physical violence (130).

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