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The Hidden Depths of García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

Abstract: *In Chronicle of a Death Foretold, an anonymous narrator examines the murder of a young man more than two decades after it had occurred. Although a judicial inquest determined that two brothers, Pedro and Pablo Vicario, murdered Santiago Nasar in order to avenge their sister's loss of virginity, the narrator intimates that the entire town, which remains nameless, was complicit in the crime. In murdering Santiago, the Vicario brothers appear to obey a collective will. Ostensibly a quest for truth and an attempt to decipher a recurring and eternal present, the narrative conveys a terrible self-knowledge through a tragicomic language of dreams. The narrator is imprisoned in circular communal thought patterns and the past adumbrates the future of a society in spiritual bondage. This essay explores the symbolic imagery of *Crónica* and the acts of concealment contained in its narrative.*

Key words: *Colombian fiction; collective violence; first person narrator; dream symbolism.*

Crónica opens with an image of a solitary figure in the shadow of death: "On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on." (*Chronicle* 3) The opening sentence sets a pattern of frustrated expectancy. The reader who expects to resolve the mystery surrounding the death of Santiago will be disappointed, like the fictional townspeople who await the bishop: "It was a fleeting illusion: the bishop began to make the sign of the cross in the air opposite the crowd on the pier, and he kept doing it mechanically afterwards, without malice or inspiration, until the boat was lost from view." (*Chronicle* 17) Just as Santiago's mother had predicted, the bishop bypasses the town: "He won't even get off the boat... He'll give an obligatory blessing, as always, and go back the way he came. He hates this town." (*Chronicle* 8) Her words evoke the indifference, even contempt, of the Church for the forsaken and isolated community.²

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² The scene of the evanescent bishop in *Crónica* recalls the naïve anticipation of the townspeople in Luis García Berlanga's 1952 film *¡Bienvenido Mr. Marshall!* as they await the Americans who will supposedly deliver reconstruction aid to them. Oblivious to the townspeople and their ceremonial fanfare, the Americans and their police escort drive by at full speed, leaving disappointment in their wake. As a young journalist, García Márquez enthused in a film review, "La historia del buen cine español comienza con *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall*" (*Obra periodística* 123) ["The history of fine Spanish cinema begins with *¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall!*"].

The second sentence of the novel foreshadows Santiago's disembowelment at the front door of his home: "He'd dreamed he was going through a grove of timber trees where a gentle drizzle was falling, and for an instant he was happy in his dream, but when he awoke he felt completely spattered with bird shit." (*Chronicle* 3) The sensation of flying in the almost comically Freudian dream has obvious sexual connotations. When Santiago recounts the dream to his mother, Plácida Linero, she assures him, "Any dream about birds means good health" (*Chronicle* 6), words that recall the humorous association of birds with the penis - *el pájaro loco* [the crazy bird] - which is common throughout Latin America.

The fig trees in the dream recall the story in *Genesis* of the shame of Adam and Eve, who hid their nakedness with fig leaves after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The image of the fig leaf also evokes the act of concealment in a narrative in which the role of the unspoken is paramount. Meredith Anne Skura observes that "like the poet, the psychoanalyst asks about a character's unacknowledged motives, but unlike the poet, he traces these back to other thoughts, other experiences, other contexts, which gave rise to motives and give them their only meaning" (39). Although unconscious or unacknowledged motives and emotions permeate the narrative of *Crónica*, García Márquez denies interest in psychoanalyzing his characters,³

because that would need a scientific training which I don't possess. The opposite happens. I develop my characters and work on them, in the belief that I'm only making use of their poetical aspects. When a character has been assembled, some of the experts tell me that this is a psychoanalytic analysis. And I'm confronted then with a series of scientific assumptions that I don't hold and have never even dreamed of. ("Interview by Rita Guibert" *Conversations* 40)

Nevertheless, psychoanalytical approaches can enrich our understanding of *Crónica*, as when R. A. Kerr identifies the image of the barred door as both the locus of action and a motif of frustration:

Freud has commented on the psychological dimensions of the symbolism of locked doors by observing that "windows and doors in and out... take over the meaning of orifices in the body... and the question of the room being opened or locked fits in with this symbolism"... Santiago is murdered at the locked doorway of his home for allegedly having penetrated what Freud would have characterized as Angela's "sexual door". The murder occurs just after Santiago assaults ("Me agarró toda la panocha") the sexual "door" of the young servant who opened his front door for him to permit him to exit, and just after his own mother mistakenly locks him out of his house, forcing him to face his attackers emptyhanded. (89)

Kerr counterposes the barred door of Santiago's home, which symbolizes the reader's inability to elucidate the mysteries in *Crónica*, to the open door of the prostitute María Alejandrina (88-90). The narrator dwells on Santiago's assertive masculinity, which is

³ In interviews given shortly after the publication of *Crónica*, García Márquez said that he liked "to leave the unconscious where it is," since that had given him "good results as a writer" ("Interview by Claudia Dreifus" 126), and that he disliked sociological terms such as 'nivel,' 'parámetro,' 'simbiosis,' and 'enfoque' ['level,' 'parameter,' 'symbiosis,' and 'focus'] (*Olor* 36).

evidenced by his numerous firearms, passion for horses, mastery of falconry, and crude passes at Divina Flor, daughter of the family cook. The townspeople appear to resent Santiago, the son of a wealthy Arab or 'turco' [Turk], a term from the times when many Arabs were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Another wealthy and privileged outsider is Bayardo San Román. He is the son of a general and his name closely resembles 'boyardo' [boyar] a feudal lord in medieval Russia and Eastern Europe.⁴³ Before his marriage to Angela, the ostentatious Bayardo chooses the best home in the town and proffers an incredible sum to its owner, a widower whose home held a lifetime of memories. A doctor describes how the widower, weeping with rage, accepted the money, only to die of sadness a few months later.

Angela recollects her first impression of Bayardo: "I detested conceited men, and I'd never seen one so stuck-up. Besides I thought he was a Polack." (*Chronicle* 30) The word 'polaco' [Pole] heightens Bayardo's feudal aspect while the word 'ínfula' not only refers to Bayardo's pomposity, but also suggests that Bayardo, who is obsessed with female virginity, is a victim of the Catholic Church. The *ínfula*, a ceremonial white band worn by priests and bishops, was placed on the victims of the Inquisition.

Bayardo is a mysterious visitor who disturbs the social equilibrium (Ávila 29).⁵ According to the narrator, Bayardo humiliates the town's best swimmers in a race. When, half asleep, he glimpses Angela Vicario for the first time, Bayardo casually tells his landlady, "When I wake up, remind me that I'm going to marry her." (*Chronicle* 29) Cristo Bedoya details to the narrator the lavish expenses of Bayardo and Angela's wedding:

He recounted that they had sacrificed forty turkeys and eleven hogs for the guests, and four calves which the bridegroom had set up to be roasted for the people on the public square. He recounted that 205 cases of contraband alcohol had been consumed and almost two thousand bottles of cane liquor, which had been distributed among the crowd. There wasn't a single person, rich or poor, who hadn't participated in some way in the wildest party the town had ever seen. Santiago was dreaming aloud.

"That's what my wedding's going to be like," he said. "Life will be too short for people to tell about it." (*Chronicle* 18)

These last words are tinged with irony, for Santiago will not live to see his wedding. Like Santiago, the narrator is envious of Bayardo given how he dwells on the statistical particulars of the feast.

The narrator makes it appear as though rage towards the wealthy underlies the community's complicity in Santiago's death; and indeed the name of the Vicario brothers suggests that they act vicariously. They stalk Santiago like "insomniac sleepwalkers" (*Chronicle* 15), in a state of mind more oneiric than rational. The Vicario brothers

⁴ The resemblance is such that one critic, René Campos, repeatedly refers to 'Bayardo' as 'Boyardo' (231-32).

⁵ Pablo Luis Ávila notes the similarly unsettling effect of the outsider in *Cien Años de Soledad*, in which the appearance of Mr. Herbert, who represents United States business interests, upsets the harmony of Macondo (29). This disruption culminates in the massacre of the striking banana plantation workers. The subsequent deluge that washes away all traces of the massacre is a physical projection of the suppression of collective memory.

apparently do not act, but are acted upon. They are metaphoric vicars who punish Santiago like ecclesiastical judges carrying out a sentence. The Vicario brothers seem reluctant to commit the crime, since they publicly announce their intention to murder Santiago, and even reportedly regard Santiago with pity. Santiago's lonely death appears to be a matter of destiny rather than a tragedy caused by personal rancor.

The characters all seem to know about the impending death. When Cristo Bedoya tries to prevent his friend's death by telling Pedro Vicario that Santiago has a revolver, Pedro only responds, "Dead men can't shoot." (*Chronicle* 108) The narrator's sister, Margot, recalls that as she walked by Santiago, he "already had the face of a dead man." (*Chronicle* 110) Clotilde Armenta has a ghost-like vision of Santiago at dawn, dressed in aluminum, recalling Santiago's own dream in which he glides alone in a tin airplane through a forest. The narrator writes that the visiting judge was perplexed by the coincidences leading to Santiago's death, such as when Santiago's mother slammed (in the judge's melodramatic words) "the fatal door" (*Chronicle* 12) just before her son reached it. The stench from the disemboweled Santiago wafts through town and implicates everyone in his death.

The narrator stresses the communal awareness beneath the surface of events, the kind that C. F. Keppler, citing Jung, describes as an "impersonal or transpersonal, or collective unconscious, reflecting a primitive pre-individuality" (5) compared to which individual consciousness "is no more than a small and lonely outpost of light, whose knowledge of the vast dark hinterland of psychic energy from which it has emerged is fragmentary and referential" (202). Some critics take their cue from the narrator. Gustavo Pellón, for instance, focuses on the dynamics of collective violence in *Crónica* while barely noticing the self-serving character of its narrative. Pellón overlooks the hidden motives of the narrator whose stated intention is to reconstruct the different perspectives of witnesses into an illuminating whole – to reconstruct the broken shards of the mirror of memory.⁶

The narrator, however, is unreliable. Because he once regarded both Bayardo and Santiago as sexual rivals, the narrator tends to project his own qualities on to them. Santiago appears to have been falsely accused of taking Angela's virginity, since the narrator pointedly tells us that Santiago and Angela were never seen together: "My personal impression is that he died without understanding his death." (*Chronicle* 101) The image of Santiago dressed in white on the day of his death heightens our sense of his innocence.

The narrator repeatedly imbues his narrative with a sense of fatality, such as when Pablo Vicario places a knife in his brother's hand, saying "There's no way out of this... It's as if it had already happened." (*Chronicle* 61) This fatality is a stratagem both of avoidance and denial, one that points to the unspeakable. The narrator is not only a friend of Santiago, but also a distant cousin of Angela Vicario. That explains in part his interest in the murder, but

⁶ Margaret Hart views *Crónica* in light of this comment by the Chilean writer Jorge Edwards: "Somos países de memoria simple, de conciencia histórica pobre, con escasa capacidad de aprendizaje y con capacidad de olvido igualmente escasa" (qtd. in Hart 582) ["We are countries of simple memory, or impoverished historical awareness, with scant capacity for learning and as scant capacity for forgetting"]. Hart concludes that *Crónica* "parece dar fe a esta cita" ["appears to confirm that quote"] and that the name of Santiago Nasar is reminiscent both of "Santiago Matamoros, el santo guerrero, y de Nasser, el presidente egipcio asesinado" (583) ["Santiago Matamoros, the holy warrior, and Nasser, the assassinated Egyptian president"]. However, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser died of a heart attack in 1970. It was his successor Anwar Sadat who was assassinated in 1981.

not the reason why the narrator never divulges his name even though his relatives are those of García Márquez. Like the investigating judge, the narrator is a nameless enigma who is obsessed with the mystery of Santiago's murder. The missing pages in the judge's investigative report reflect the narrator's reticence and omissions.

The narrator describes the judge as "a man burning with the fever of literature [who] kept falling into lyrical distractions that ran contrary to the rigor of his profession" (*Chronicle* 99), rather like the narrator himself, who approves of the judge's rhetorical touches:

They were twins: Pedro and Pablo Vicario. They were twenty-four years old, and they looked so much alike that it was difficult to tell them apart. 'They were hard-looking, but of a good sort,' the report said. I, who had known them since grammar school, would have written the same thing." (*Chronicle* 15)

Like the judge, the narrator often lapses into narrative exuberance. The narrator describes how after Angela moved to a house in a coastal village, the toilets would overflow during high tides, leaving fish flopping about in the bedrooms. This description, though still within the realm of possibility, verges on the fantastic. Such is also the case when the narrator tells us that the middle-aged Bayardo brought a bundle of 2,000 unread letters when he finally returned to Angela. Such fabulous detail lends an illusory completeness to the narrative.

Donald L. Shaw comments that "García Márquez's technique seems to be to mount one inexplicable aspect of human behavior on top of another: the more difficult it is to fathom Bayardo, the more incomprehensible does Angela's belated coup de foudre seem" (101). However, *Crónica* is not told by an omniscient narrator but by a first person narrator whose psyche reflects a spiritually sick society. Shaw's benighted view, which recalls the Mexican saying, "No hay que buscarle mangas al chaleco" ("Don't look for the sleeves on a vest"), might best be countered by Sandra María Boschetto's analysis:

Angela is a victim of the 'love disorder' which the disquieting women experience. Confined by her mother in a forgotten village, Angela discovers that 'hate and love are reciprocal passions'... Hate is the other side of passion, an accidental hate, a misguided child of the same love. It is experienced as passion in Angela's intimate perversions (130).

Why did Angela tell her brother that Santiago Nasar had taken her virginity? According to the narrator, Angela found Santiago's name "at first sight among the many, many easily confused names from this world and the other, and she nailed it to the wall with her well-aimed dart, like a butterfly with no will whose sentence has always been written." (*Chronicle* 47) Angela disliked Santiago and resented his rash comments about the cost of her wedding. Tellingly, the narrator alludes to a persistent rumor that hints at another motive for Angela's naming of Santiago:

The most current version, perhaps because it was the most perverse, was that Angela Vicario was protecting someone who really loved her and she had chosen Santiago Nasar's name because she thought her brothers would never dare go up against him. I tried to get that truth out of her myself when I visited her the second time, with all my arguments in order,

but she barely lifted her eyes from the embroidery to knock them down. “Don’t beat it to death, cousin,” she told me. “He was the one.” (*Chronicle* 90)

Significantly, Angela does not meet the narrator’s gaze when she reiterates this claim twenty three years after Santiago’s death.

The narrator deems the rumor perverse because it was likely his dalliance with Angela which cost Santiago his life. Moreover, the narrator had earlier lain in what was supposed to have been Santiago’s bed. Whenever the rather possessive Santiago left her quarters, María Alejandrina, the prostitute, would signal the narrator to join her. The menace is unmistakable in the warning that the narrator gave to his rival when he cautioned Santiago to stay away from María Alejandrina: “I warned him: ‘A falcon who chases a warlike crane can only hope for a life of pain.’” (*Chronicle* 65)

The narrator is identified with Santiago to the point where he becomes his double. Santiago is named after his godmother, Luisa Santiaga Márquez Iguarán, who happens to be the narrator’s mother. When the narrator visits María Alejandrina just after Santiago’s death, she can’t bring herself to make love to the narrator, telling him, “I can’t... you smell of him.” (*Chronicle* 78) Furthermore, when the investigating judge asks whether she knew Santiago, Angela replies simply, “Fue mi autor” (*Crónica* 160) [“He was my author”⁷ (my translation)], reinforcing the impression that she had substituted the name of Santiago for that of the narrator who is the ostensible author of *Crónica*.⁸ Twenty-three years later, when the narrator meets Angela again, her mother receives him “like a difficult ghost” (*Chronicle* 89), an image that recalls the deceased Santiago and which suggests that the mother sees the narrator less as a relative than as the man who disgraced her daughter.

The narrator’s self-exculpating fatalism turns Santiago’s murder into a communal affair. If everyone is guilty of Santiago’s death, then no one is to blame, as the official investigator hints in the words that he scrawls in the margins of his report: “Fatality makes us invisible.” (*Chronicle* 113) Critics such as Pellón fail to see that the web of fatality is woven by the heavy hand of a suspect narrator, not by the author of *Crónica*. As García Márquez said in an interview, “no he considerado nunca la fatalidad como un factor determinante. Lo que puede parecer fatalidad en *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* es simplemente un elemento del mecanismo narrative.” (qtd. in Ávila 38) [“I have never considered fatality to be a decisive factor. What might appear to be fatality in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is simply an element of the narrative mechanism.”]

Crónica parodies such literary genres as the detective novel, gothic novel, classical tableaux, Spanish Golden Age honor dramas, epistolary romance, and bad literature (Kercher 91-96), thereby highlighting the artifice and interestedness of all narration. The novel depends on what remains untold as in Hemingway’s method of story-telling, which García Márquez describes as follows: “un cuento, como el *iceberg*, debe estar sustentado en la parte que no se ve: en el estudio, en la reflexión, el material reunido y no utilizado directamente en la historia” (*Olor* 43) [“a story, like the iceberg, should be supported by the part that remains unseen: in the study, in the reflection, in the material that is gathered but not used directly in the story.”] In an interview, García Márquez remarked:

⁷ In his otherwise magisterial translation of *Crónica*, Gregory Rabassa translates this sentence as “He was my perpetrator” (*Chronicle* 100), which detracts from the rich ambiguity of the original.

⁸ Angela, but not the reader, has license to confuse the fictional narrator with the author of *Crónica*.

The really superb detective story is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, because it is the detective who discovers that he himself is the murderer... The only irritating thing about the detective story is that it doesn't leave you any mystery. It is a literature made to reveal and destroy mystery." (qtd. in Díaz-Migoyo 79)

The purported chronicle consists of several lurid retellings of the apparently inevitable murder. The narrator enumerates the perforations in Santiago's body in excruciating detail. Michael Meade observes that "wounds work as thresholds between inner and outer realities. Seeing into the wounds and scars reveals that everyone is wounded and teaches one how to see the person coming out of the wound." (qtd. in Slattery 1) Santiago's wounds conjure a culture that naturalizes the mass slaughter of animals and which camouflages brutality as honor.

The color red burns like a fuse throughout the narrative. We see it in the narrator's blood-soaked prose; in the red ink of the notations in the judge's investigative report; in the red crests of doomed roosters; in the red proof of virginity that fails to materialize on Angela's bed sheets on her wedding night; in the fiery red dress that Angela's mother, Pura Vicario, forces her daughter to wear immediately after Santiago's death; and in the exposed intestines of Santiago which resemble a bouquet of red roses, an image that ties *machista* violence to the conventions of sentimental love.

Red is the emblem of a violent world. God's creation is a slaughterhouse: the Nasar family cattle ranch is named El Divino Rostro. The family cook, Victoria Guzmán, uses the bloody knife with which she butchers rabbits to warn Santiago to stay away from her daughter, Divina Flor. When Victoria tosses steaming rabbit entrails to voracious dogs, a shaken Santiago tells her, "Don't be a savage... Make believe it was a human being." (*Chronicle* 10). The scene foreshadows his "moan of a calf" (*Chronicle* 118) when the Vicario brothers murder Santiago with butcher knives.

The grim fate of animals resembles that of the Vicario sisters, of whom the narrator's mother says, "Any man will be happy with them because they've been raised to suffer." (*Chronicle* 31)⁹ This statement explains the behavior of Angela after Bayardo discovers that she is not a virgin. Prompted by a beating from her mother, Angela remembers Bayardo. Years later, she tells the narrator, "I wasn't crying because of the blows of anything that had happened... I was crying because of him." (*Chronicle* 91) Angela describes to the narrator her visceral reaction to the mere thought of her mother: "Just seeing her would turn my stomach... but I couldn't see her without remembering him." (*Chronicle* 93) The image of the entrails recalls both the rabbits and Santiago.

⁹ This sense of compassion for animals is somewhat tempered by the fact that, in one of his early interviews, García Márquez mentioned how he enjoyed a dish of roasted rabbit and rice whenever he visited the home of the Italian actress Monica Vitti ("Interview by Eva Norvind" 153).

The Church fosters this culture of violence and suffering.¹⁰ When the Vicario brothers seek refuge in a church after murdering Santiago, the priest tells them that they were pardoned in the eyes of God since the killing had been a matter of honor. Although at a conscious level they may feel absolved, the Vicario brothers remain haunted by the stench of death. Arnold M. Penuel notes that the psychosomatic disorders of the Vicario brothers, such as their inability to sleep for three nights, constitute a language of the body which expresses their unconscious revulsion to their crime (763).

Santiago's body, further eviscerated by an autopsy that was botched by a priest, bears the symbolic imprint of the Church: "the priest had pulled out the sliced-up intestines by the roots, but in the end he didn't know what to do with them, and he gave them an angry blessing and threw them into the garbage pail." (*Chronicle* 76) The grotesque image recalls both the bloody rabbit entrails and the distant benediction by the bishop on the town. The sentimental image of Christianity is further shattered by the hyperbolic trajectory of an accidental discharge from Santiago's gun which: "wrecked the cupboard in the room, went through the dining room of the house next door with the thunder of war, and turned a life-size saint on the main altar of the church on the opposite side of the square to plaster dust." (*Chronicle* 6)

The figure of the bishop further reinforces the association of the Church with brutality. As the bishop approaches the town, caged roosters begin to make a din. The roosters, an offering from the townspeople, are destined to end up in the bishop's cockscorn soup. The crowing of the roosters recalls the prophecy of Jesus that Peter would deny him three times before the roosters crowed (related in *Matthew* 26:34, *Luke* 22:34, *John* 13:38, and *Mark* 14:30, 14: 66-72). The crowing roosters suggest that the bishop undermines the very faith that he supposedly represents (Penuel 757).

The boat that carries the bishop bellows like an animal that feels its burden (Cartín de Guier 26). However, the bishop's burdensome and even sinister aspect is lost on the townspeople: "They'd placed the sick people in the archways to receive God's medicine." (*Chronicle* 21) During her conversation with the narrator, more than two decades after the death of Santiago Nasar, Angela Vicario justified her refusal to be married by the bishop: "I didn't want to be blessed by a man who cut off only the combs for soup and threw the rest of the rooster into the garbage." (*Chronicle* 39)

Crónica concludes with Santiago appearing to witness his own death. The narrator's aunt, Wenefrida Márquez, who wields a knife as she scales fish in her patio, sees Santiago stagger towards his home. She cries out to ask what had happened, and Santiago replies, "They've killed me, Wene child" (*Chronicle* 120), speaking of his death in the simple past, even though his death will occur moments later when he collapses in the kitchen of his home. His premonition is but one of the many foretellings in *Crónica* which, as Josefa

¹⁰ The names of many characters have an unmistakable Christian resonance. The name of María Alejandrina recalls St. Mary of Egypt, the fourth century saint who is venerated in Eastern Orthodox churches. St. Mary became a prostitute in Alexandria when she was just twelve years old but was reformed after she went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Cross. Arnold M. Penuel notes that the name 'Nasar' recalls Nazareth, the town most identified with Jesus, and the Vicario brothers, Pedro and Pablo, are named after the disciples of Christ (758). Santiago's closest friend is named Cristo Bedoya. Esther P. Mocega-González associates the name of Poncio Vicario, the blind family patriarch, with that of Poncius Pilate, the Roman prefect who sentenced Jesus to death (813).

Salmón observes, constitute a closed and rigid reality (76). The narrator is imprisoned in circular communal thought patterns and the past adumbrates the future of a society in spiritual bondage:

For years we couldn't talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to spin around a single common anxiety. The cocks of dawn would catch us trying to give order to the chain of many chance events that had made absurdity possible, and it was obvious that we weren't doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of us could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to us by fate. (*Chronicle* 96)

The cries of the roosters reproach the brutal hypocrisy of the townspeople. García Márquez undermines belief in his narrator and by extension in that of narration, by failing to reconstitute the broken mirror of limited and tainted memory, whose pieces remain lost in the hidden depths of *Crónica*.¹¹

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