Craft and Storytelling: Romance and Reality in Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez

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Abstract

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Camila Vélez Valencia

2021

This dissertation describes how the novels, novellas and short stories of Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez subvert the conventions of the European realist novel and indeed the quotidian world of real facts itself in favor of a romance grounded in everyday experience. In their fictions, Conrad’s and García Márquez’s narrators trace the apparition of the wonderful in an otherwise realistic world through their mastery of craft and its concomitant vernaculars. They draw on the tropes of the traditional romance—digression, repetition and chance—to reenchant disenchanted worlds, to reconstrue the strange. They borrow the skills of the oral storyteller—craftsmanship, gesture and perspicacity—to make those enchanted worlds feel real, to integrate them into a common consciousness. The works in question incorporate and preserve stories, as well as the techniques necessary for telling those stories before the rise of the literary novel. They contest the dissemination of ideas cut off from technical practice and material knowledge, instead promoting epistemes grounded in craft and storytelling—ways of knowing, seeing and narrating that are polysemic, regenerative, communal and quotidian. In the works I focus on in this dissertation, these two authors ironize the spread of dogma at the expense of the experientially and locally known. García Márquez and Joseph Conrad, I will argue in this dissertation, invigorate and challenge ossified narrative conventions and solutions by capturing instances in which everyday practices are disrupted or misunderstood. Their composite and hybrid creations revivify modes of seeing and saying that contest attempts to order from a distance what is unknown—attempts to idealize, rationalize or belittle peripheral worlds with ignorance or smugness.
To my mother, her sister and my sons.
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Illustrations

Figure 1.

*Men of the Nsongo District with hands of two of their countrymen Lingomo and Bolenge murdered by rubber sentries of ABIR Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company in May 1904. The two European men are Mr. Stannard and Mr. Harris of the Congo Balolo Mission at Baringa.*

© Anti-Slavery International

Figure 2.

Man weaving at Luebo.

© Anti-Slavery International

Figure 3.

*Pietro Crespi reads while Amaranta weaves, a scene from Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

Figure 4.

Aracne and Minerva weaving.

Figure 5.

*Engraving of an alchemical laboratory and library.*

[https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2038030](https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2038030).
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Buritaca, Colombia.
Introduction

Work is the only device I know of.
-Truman Capote

Part 1: Preliminaries

Principal Aims

The principal aim of this dissertation is to compare the novels and tales of Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez. It sounds simple, but coming up with a comparative structure that is solid or interesting enough to outlive the drudgery of writing a dissertation is a feat worthy of Hephaestus. Deciding what I wanted to compare about the works of these two writers took time, patience and a long series of missteps and misprisions.

From the beginning it seemed to me that there was something precious and paradigmatic about these two authors’ depiction of reality. Their works capture worlds that are stark and ruthless, but also perplexing and wonderful. I thought it curious that these two authors, born in different times and places, could give credence to the real without also stripping it of its marvels and enigmas. Although stark and ruthless, their works lack the dogmatic glorification of the humble of the naturalist school. Although perplexing and wonderful, they lack the saccharine finales and the ingenuous fantasies of the chivalric romance.

But this initial intuition, although promising, was just a beginning, a beginning which led me to a more obviously interesting question. How do these authors manage to
provide a picture of the world that stays near the real but is also equipped to see what is marvelous about it? These authors’ worlds seem enchanted, I thought, because they are suffused with the elements of romance: recurrence, digression and chance.¹

A further inquiry into these authors’ use of the elements of romance eventually revealed to me that the tactics and narrative conventions of the romance are oddly well equipped to see and to describe the peripheral worlds and set of circumstances that characterize Conrad and García Márquez’s novels and tales.² In García Márquez and

¹ For Northrop Frye, romance is the form of modern writing closest to the pure story. In the opening pages of *The Secular Scripture* (1976), he claims that romance “is just a story,” a genre that is both antirepresentational and abstract, and is, in this sense, opposed to a work with “truth correspondence to reality” (38).

Romance is characterized not only by its close relation to stories and storytelling, but also to errancy and digression. “The realist,” claims Frye, “with his sense of logical and horizontal continuity, leads us to the ends of the story; the romancer, scrambling over a series of disconnected episodes, seems to be trying to get us to the top of it” (50). In *Inescapable Romance* (1979), Patricia Parker defines romance as a species of aberrance—a digressive “wandering from epic.” In the *Orlando Furioso*, she argues, “error” is “a romance pun, sign of the interplay between mental and geographical wandering” (20). It also “ranges from the diversions of chivalric adventure to the terrifying spectacle of Orlando’s madness, from a pleasing ‘divertimento’ to a willful deviation from epic and its single path.” For a more thorough exploration of the distinction between romance and epic see Quint, Zatti and Gough 523–52.

In this dissertation I will explore García Márquez’s and Conrad’s use of romance which I construe as the incorporation of stories and storytelling processes to revitalize ossified and sterile narrative techniques and styles. These authors, I argue, adopt the strategies of the oral storyteller to bring about an illusion of reality that is practice-based and every-day rather than abstract and romanticized. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explain and theoretically situate my use of the term “romances of reality.” This composite term allows me to describe and compare these two authors’ use of stories to create a different effect of reality—one which is grounded in autochthonous craft practices and in these practices’ ways of construing the world. In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, I explore in greater depth these two authors’ subversive deployment of some of the tropes of romance—errancy, recurrency and chance, in particular—to question idealistic, displaced, and superimposed notions of order, reason and causal development. These authors resort to and readjust traditional romance techniques to reveal how seemingly progressive, rational and order-giving plans and prognostications may give way to disorder, alienation and obfuscation.

² In the past three decades the fraught relationship between postcolonialism and European realism has been a subject of critical scrutiny. One conclusion of this scholarship is that the rationalized world of the realist
Conrad’s fictional universes, digressions are not distractions that are eventually overcome, but inescapable circumstances. In these worlds, experience is defined and shaped by repetition, interruption and accident, even if this is often denied by those ruling or hoping to rule over them. Through a mode of narration which is digressive, reiterative and non-causal, these two authors reveal marginal worlds and modes of experiencing more vividly, we might suppose, than if they had relied entirely on tropes given by the realist novel—such as self-development, social mobility and female virtue—or by the foundational epic—such as etiology, nationalism, and conquest. By infusing novel directs and limits narrative possibilities. “The moment we think of the world as disenchanted,” argues Dipesh Chakrabarty, “we set limits to the ways the past can be narrated” (89).

In his study of Monica Ali’s Brick Lane, Alistar Cormak argues that the traditionally “linear development” of the realist novel must be transformed in order to suitably portray hybrid and postcolonial experiences. “On one hand, realism ceases to be traditional, because it is called upon to depict this new social juncture; the form’s limits become visible, as do the presumptions by which it works. On the other, and perhaps more importantly, what I will term the ‘doubleness’ of hybrid cultural and psychological structures is flattened when it is represented in a form that stresses linear development toward self-awareness” (696). In “The Politics of the Possible,” Kumkum Sangari argues that the postcolonial fiction of García Márquez and Salman Rushdie is nonmimetic, refusing the verisimilitude, linearity and coherence commonly associated with realism, conveying instead forms of creating meaning which are contextual, social and dynamically varied (5). In “Epic and Empire” David Quint argues that “the condition of non-narratability” is the condition “of the vanquished and the powerless, those who drop out of the historical narrative written by the winners” (27).

To summarize very broadly bourgeois realism in the 18th and 19th century looks like this: it believes in progress and mobility; it favors the young; it is institutionally minded; it censors and sanitizes; it is traditional and universal, but also forward-thinking and exclusionary; it prefers domestic settings, but is happy to make its way to the colonies if push comes to shove; it promotes a set of values generally associated with both Protestantism and capitalism (i.e. rational belief, accumulation of capital and austerity); it is produced in an ambience of surging mechanization and mass reproduction, and, to slip one more defining characteristic over the transom—it claims to marry for love, but may still do so for land.

In Mimesis (1946) Auerbach lays down “two distinguishing characteristics of modern realism”: first, “everyday occurrences in a low social stratum, the provincial petty bourgeoisie, are taken very seriously; second, “everyday occurrences are accurately and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history (the period of the bourgeois monarchy)” (484).

The rise of the western European realist novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth century coincides with the rise of the European bourgeoisie. In Phantom Formation (1996), Marc Redfield provides a thorough list of
into their novels and tales the elements of romance not as accidents that will be overcome, but as integral components of the social fabric of the everyday, Conrad and the institutions that emerged alongside the bourgeoisie: “industrialization, capitalization and imperialist expansion; the secularization of religious discourse; the reconfiguration of gender roles; the emergence of the culture industry, and so on” (11). The modern European realist novel emerged during an age of print. “What did the birth of a consumer society mean for the European novel?” asks Franco Moretti in his article “History of the Novel, Theory of the Novel.” His response: “More novels, and less attention” (8).

In The Economy of Character (1988), Deidre Lynch links the emergence of novelistic interiority in early 19th century England to the simultaneous emergence of mass commerce. The novel’s sudden interest in privacy and individuality was a response to mass production and consumption and the transition from a gentry to a middle-class economy. Jane Austen’s novels, for example, “position interiority at a relay point that articulates the personal with the mass-produced” (210). The novel’s interest in the internal monologue of its characters is indicative of a surging preoccupation with the “repetitions that define the economic cycles of a commercial society” (211).

In Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987), Nancy Armstrong argues that the modern individual was “first and foremost a woman.” She insists that “one cannot distinguish the production of the new female ideal either from the rise of the novel or from the rise of the new middle classes in England” (8). Women produced “the economic changes that made it possible to represent English history as the narrative of unfolding capitalism” and the “written representations of the self” which “allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality” (8). Middle-class authority, claims Armstrong, “rested in large part upon the authority the novels attributed to women” (6). The novel, argues Armstrong, domesticates female desire, which “constitutes the gravest danger”; “the success of repeated pressures to coax and nudge sexual desire into conformity with the norms of heterosexual monogamy,” writes Armstrong, “affords a fine way of closing a novel and provides a satisfactory goal for a text to achieve” (8).

The first realist novels (Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, Mansfield Park, Pamela, The Red and the Black) expound bourgeois virtues and values, the values and virtues of its consumers—enterprise, prudence, humor, objectivity, modesty, moral edification, mobility and pride of action (McCloskey 179).

In the novel, the logic of the plot or of succession is the logic of action—a character’s pursuit of definite ends. (This rationalized form of action which Lukács ironically deems “aimless” and “homeless” in his Theory of the Novel). The subject of the realist novel produces itself in history. The rational pursuit of economic ends through varied means—ranging from marriage, travel and industry to wit—is characteristic of the first realist novels. According to Michael McKeon, the novel emerged “as genre in that its abstract generic identity has become discernible as the discursive whole that organizes the disparate instances of narrative discourse—the disparate parts—that heretofore have lacked a totalizing generic categorization” (7). The world of the realist novel is generally navigable—coherent, consistent and knowable. See Watt 2001 and Cormack 695–721,

3 The chivalric code is, according to Auerbach, absolute, “both in its ideal realization and in the absence of any earthly and practical purposes” (134). It has no “political function...no practical reality at all.”
García Márquez reenchant worlds that the imposed narratives of order, reason and progress have partly disenchanted.4

But how, I asked myself at the beginning of my research, is the spirit of romance, notoriously abstract and idealistic, integrated into the everyday worlds of these two authors? The tropes of romance may be useful to describe experiences which fall outside

4 In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Max Weber argued that the rationalization of the world resulted from the elimination of “magic as a means to salvation” (69). The “radical elimination of magic from the world allowed for no other psychological course than the practice of worldly asceticism” (87). This ascetic conduct meant “a rational planning of the whole of one’s life, in accordance with God’s will,” leading to the “rationalization of conduct within this world.” The rational organization of labor and capital thus allowed for the “development of a rational bourgeois economic life” (183).

In his 1919 lecture, “Science as Vocation,” Weber argued that the disenchantment of the world is the end result of a “process of intellectual rationalization due to modern advances in knowledge and technology” (16). Increasing “rationalization and intellectualization,” continues Weber, “does not, in other words, mean a greater general knowledge of the conditions we live under.” Rather, “it means something else: the knowledge, or belief, that we could find out if we wanted to.” That everything can, in theory, be known through calculation means, for Weber, “the disenchanting of the world” (18). Rigorous intellectual work is paramount to Weber—work which creates meaning which is various and polysemic. I discuss Weber’s relevance to my overall argument in greater detail in the first chapter of this dissertation.

In their response to Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the irrationalities reason had seemingly stamped out, returned in other, more violent, guises in the modern, seemingly secularized world. See Bernstein.

Lukács’ 1916 *Theory of the Novel* responds to and complicates Weber’s ideas about disenchantment and subjectivity. For Lukács, meaning in modernity is acutely elusive yet definitive—present only in the awareness of its loss. In *The Theory of the Novel*, meaning refuses to “enter into empirical life.” The “autonomous life of interiority” (i.e., the life of the novel) argues Lukács, “is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm; when the gods are silent and neither sacrifice nor the ecstatic gift of tongues can solve their riddle” (66). The “epic individual” (the hero of the novel) is unlike the epic hero, who is “strictly speaking, never an individual” (66).

The novel is for Lukács “internally homogenous, men do not differ qualitatively from one another.” Modern man’s “self-made environment,” his subjective soul, is his prison. The epic individual’s relation to his environment is alienated—his experience of it is more of a contemplative mood than any sort of inevitability. The life of the novel is not the organic and communal life of the epic, but the homogenous and alienated world in which “the soul” is at home. “The world of man that matters is the one where the soul, as man, god or demon, is at home: then the soul finds everything it needs, it does not have to create or animate anything of its own self, for is existence is filled to overbrimming with finding, gathering and moulding of all that is given as cognate to the soul” (64–5).
systematic attempts to order them—attempts which, more often than not, lead to
estrandment and mystification rather than order and clarification. However, they are
not always equipped to account for the quotidian, the palpable and the pragmatic—
pragmatic, here, being taken to mean grounded in a particular craft or practice. The
answer to this question, I suspected, must lie outside the realm of romance. I started to
look for answers in Conrad’s and García Márquez’s works, and their pronounced
fascination with the function of tales and the situation of their tellers.

The storyteller, unlike the novelist or the epic poet, is distinctly connected to
manual making practices, to his craft. The tools and the skills that the craftsman uses in
his everyday practice are also the tools and the skills that he uses to observe, interpret
and make stories of his immediate surroundings and experiences. Knowledge is
contained not only in material that is shaped by human hands (tapestries, frescoes, cave-
paintings), but also in the stories told by the people doing the shaping. In other words,
stories are not just communicated via handmade objects, they emerge out of the
processes through which these objects have come to be. The figure of the storytelling
craftsman, I will argue throughout this dissertation, allows Joseph Conrad and García
Márquez to ground their fictional universes in the sphere of the tangible. These two
writers ennoble the writing of stories as a handicraft in its own right.

Through the figure of the storytelling craftsman, Conrad and García Márquez
contest idealistic and abstract visions of the world which are imposed from afar and from
above. These abstract narratives promote knowledge and knowledge-acquiring
mechanisms that are apart from and inaccessible to those they are imposed on.
Storytelling craftsmen are particularly attuned to see and speak of what is nearest at
hand. But stories are not just vehicles with which to depict the everyday, they provide
frames with which to decipher the incomprehensible in a familiar but not facile manner.
Furthermore, because attached to local and everyday practices, stories are intrinsically tied to the vernacular. The idioms contained in stories are the idioms required for the manipulation of earthly matter by craft. García Márquez’s and Conrad’s storytellers, I will claim in this thesis, narrate in languages that are current and craft-bound, domestic, common and collective.\(^5\)

Having discovered the crucial role that stories and storytellers play in the novels and tales of these two authors I was able to construct a theoretical framework with which to sustain my comparative reading of a representative selection of their works. The larger aim of this dissertation thus became comparing Conrad’s and García Márquez’s use of the elements of romance to reenchant disenchanted worlds and their idiosyncratic use of interpolated and intercalated stories to ground the reenchanted in the experiential, the real.\(^6\)

Their use of romance and stories to depict marvelous realities is a creative and disruptive practice. By injecting digressions, disruptions and repetitions into what initially presents itself as ordered but in fact is not, these two authors defy or circumvent

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\(^5\) Collectivity, argues Margaret Cohen in her book *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), is a “distinctive aspect of craft, what Conrad calls ‘the bond of the sea’” (34).

\(^6\) The non-linear narrative of Conrad’s *Nostromo*, argues Luz Elena Ramirez in “The Rhetoric of Development in Conrad’s *Nostromo,*” works “to undermine the foundational ideologies and practices of a Western historiography, a historiography voiced by the novel’s Captain Mitchell” (93). *Nostromo* “exposes and centralizes the frailties and contradictions of empire, the cracks in the ‘master narrative.’” It presents an “authorial challenge” to the “teleology of European power.”

The multiple perspectives and embedded tales in García Márquez’s works, question monosemic and authoritative narratives. García Márquez’s works, argues Kumkum Sangari, are characterized by constant narrative changes and interruptions and contain multiple interpolated monologues: “neither these nor the voice of the narrator is highly individuated in the bourgeois sense of being authored/authorized by a singular subjectivity or a single perspective” (116). By “providing multiple voices within the narrative,” García Márquez “fixes the social locus of the production of meaning,” allowing for a “heterogeneity that telescopes but does not set out to efface the contradictions between contending social voices.”
the alienating and programmatic narratives of a progressive teleology. By deploying knowledge and epistemological methods contained in stories and born of everyday practices, as well as these crafts’ concomitant vernaculars, these two authors defy attempts to know the world through narratives that are theoretical and estranged—narratives which obfuscate real circumstances rather than clarify them. The gratuitous inclusion of stories, the disruption by way of romance, is a regenerative process which seeks to expand and subvert the boundaries of the written word, allowing it to contain proudly strange worlds and circumstances.
Basic Evasions

Several topics fall outside the bounds of this dissertation, which I will outline here.

Although racism, sexism and anti-Semitism are pervasive in the works of these two authors, a thorough dissection of these prejudices is beyond the compass of this dissertation. I do not attempt to either explain or deny these authors’ often repellant representations of women, indigenous people, Africans and Romani people. I also do not attempt to justify or explain their prejudice by situating it historically. I deplore it. (Nonetheless I have affection for these authors, singly and in conjunction). There exists a plethora of scholarship which elucidates these unfortunate aspects of both writers’ works.  

7 In his 1977 address, “An Image of Africa,” the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe denounced the blatant problem of racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Heart of Darkness is already down in the annals of what Achebe calls “permanent literature.” Conrad is “undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good story teller into the bargain” (15). Precisely because of its canonical status, it is necessary to bring the novel’s racism to the fore. Its racism shouldn’t merely be “glossed over” in criticism, but scrutinized and reproached. Conrad’s Africa is a “setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor” (21). The novel’s reduction of Africans, claims Achebe, is arrogant and perverse. According to Padmini Mongia, Achebe’s controversial essay has for the past three decades shaped how Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is read, setting forth a critical reassessment of the novel inseparable from its racism.

In his response to Achebe’s “An Image of Africa,” the American poet Hunt Hawkins argues that Conrad’s depictions of Africans in Heart of Darkness sometimes support Achebe’s charges against the novel, sometimes not. Critics who disagree with Achebe point out that Achebe’s denunciation reduces the complexity of Conrad’s thought. However complex Conrad’s thought may be, I agree with Achebe that his racism is straightforward. Cedric Watts argues that Conrad’s “blacks” are not “dehumanized,” but very vital: “Of all the people described, by far the happiest, healthiest, and most vital are the group of blacks seen paddling their canoe through the surf of the coast” (198). Hawkins and Watt seem to miss the essential point of Achebe’s essay. Achebe did not seek to expunge Heart of Darkness from the Western Canon, but to provoke a more serious critical engagement with its racism. According to Padmini Mongia, Achebe “presents his argument precisely in order to jostle the white establishment into a consideration of race that would allow them to see its operations even in texts considered high literature” (157). According to Mark Kinkead-Weekes, to have read Achebe is “to have made a significant difference to the sensibility we bring to Conrad’s tale and to ensure that vital questions must be asked and answered if it is to go on being canonized” (49).

In his article “Conrad and Coal,” the critic Douglas Kammen argues that Conrad deflects questions of slavery and slave labor in his works—a deflection which Kammen finds problematic. Conrad, he claims, excised
I have also chosen here to use the term craftsman as shorthand for craftsmen and craftswomen, even though I devote significant attention in the second and third chapters of this dissertation to the crucial yet blatantly overlooked role women play in the perpetuation of the most important everyday crafts—knitting, cooking, and the spinning of wool (and, of course, of tales!).

Although in this dissertation I applaud the revivification of handicraft as a generative activity, I am not nostalgic. I do suggest that manual making processes and the stories that come with them can defy and undermine conventional notions of what constitutes knowledge and the appropriate methods for its acquisition. However, as I tap away on my MacBook air, I do not have it in me to repudiate the technological advances, scientific discoveries and industrial developments that have come to define the lives of real people in places as far-flung as Aracataca and Berdychiv, the birthplaces of García Márquez and Conrad. Nor do I deny the value of knowledge acquired idealistically, i.e., outside experimental and experiential contexts. I do not mean to deprecate book knowledge in the metropolis or the periphery. I grew up in the periphery and I grew up on books, as did Conrad and García Márquez. I am simply saying that the amassing of facts and knowledge that comes of working with one’s hands can subvert dogmatically

slave labor from his works to “highlight the psychological travails of his (Western) protagonist.” Similarly, he “excised the primitive accumulation of capital” to “emphasize the (im)possibility of sudden, immense riches.” Conrad’s depiction of the role of steam vessels in the slave trade and in the perpetuation of slave labor may be deflective, but it does not, I think, constitute a complete excision. Conrad is skeptical of capitalism’s rampant extraction and acquisition of resources and the violence with which it turns skilled workers into mindless laborers.

For a more thorough examination of questions of race in Conrad, see Seshagiri 16–30, Caryl 59–66, Firchow. For a thorough compendium of the women in Conrad’s life and in his literature, see Jones.

For a beguiling reading of García Márquez’s deployment of female sexuality—menstruation in particular—as a symbol of the “heterogenous experience of trauma and oppression,” see López Mejía 135–50 (148).
simplistic and idealistic narratives of the real. It seems undeniable to me that trust in the knowledge based in autochthonous practices will lead to the valorization and amplification of these practices. This process of revaluation can only intensify the polyphony of the world, which is a not-so-secret political aim of mine. But this thesis is a work of literary criticism, not of public policy. I am more interested in what narrative possibilities emerge through the reinstitution of perspectives that are informed and determined by craft than in the actual recuperation of artisanal economies (although I am for that as well).

I also do not seek here to glorify artisanal practices in order to satisfy a trendy hunger for the “handmade” and “homemade.” Attempts to satisfy market trends of this sort tend to disrupt and deform the conditions of creative production. They flatten and decontextualize the vernacular languages and local knowledge associated with autochthonous creative practices. They relegate the “artisanal” to the realm of the “quaint” and the “niche,” rather than meet it on its own terms. In fact, what I am proposing here is a glorification of the particular sort of knowledge that comes with the mastery of one craft or another—a glorification which leads to the propagation and regeneration of this knowledge in the form of stories, rather than its segmentation and relegation to the form of guidebooks or consumable merchandise.

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8 The perception of the real in Latin America, argues Sangari, is double and other. Attempts to remedy or “purify” this hybridity by supplanting it with nativist and originalist versions leads to the flattening of what is in fact a stubborn and intricate composite. According to Sangari, the “economic and ideological deformations of neocolonialism” have ruptured notions of what constitutes the real in the periphery. They have led to a perception and experience of reality which is simultaneous and hybrid. To “overcome” this rupture is not to arrive “at some essential indigenous truth by a more tortuous route” but to insist “that the epistemological problem is itself historical” (160). “The problems of meaning and representation that beset the ‘Third World,’” argues Sangari, are very different from the slippage of meaning and of the “real” which currently confronts academic discourses of Europe and America.” In this dissertation I propose an epistemic approach to the real that is informed by the cognitive tactics and strategies acquired through the practice of craft and contained in stories.
In this dissertation I question the techniques of the national epic and the realist novel for depicting the disrupted post-colonial worlds that are the backdrop to most of the works by these two authors. I do not, however, deny either genre’s capacity to capture important moments and sentiments in the history of the world with astounding creativity and perspicacity. I am well aware of these genres’ narrative innovations and subversions, as well as their unstable qualities. However, their particular variations and protests fall outside the bounds of this dissertation. I simply argue here that through the reincorporation and revaluation of tales within tales and digressive plots, Conrad and

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9 Novels have always rebelled against themselves and their predecessors. Novels are famously expansive, reactive and fluid. In his preface to The Ambassadors (1903), Henry James wrote that “the Novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms” (1321). For the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel is the heteroglossic genre par excellence—ironic, mutable, expansive, cannibalistic, anarchic. In the novel all languages (even patrician and authoritative languages) can be subverted. In fact, dissent and subversion are the source of the novel’s perennial vitality. The novel is always intruded on by the disorder that lies outside it: the folk, the foreign, the popular, the base. See Bakhtin 200–240.

The most traditionally realist novels can be read as reactive. “The rational and skeptical instincts of Defoe,” argues Watt in his The Rise of the Novel (1957) unconsciously rebel “against the sentimental scenes and speeches which the genre and its readers required” (126). Similarly, continues Watt, “another group of possible ironies centres round the amorous adventures of the heroine; we find it difficult to believe that these were told only for purposes of moral edification” (127). According to Deidre McCloskey, “the novel begins as the epic of the bourgeoisie but becomes with Balzac and Dickens an anti-epic, a Dunciad of the middle classes. German romantics and French statists and English evangelicals in the early nineteenth century were bourgeois by origin, but did not like it, not one bit” (188).

In “History of the Novel, Theory of the Novel,” Moretti argues the novel is not the “natural” form of bourgeois modernity, but rather “that through which the pre-modern imaginary continues to pervade the capitalist world” (8). The novel is “the anti-type of the spirit of modern capitalism for The Protestant Ethic; a slap in the face of realism.” “I have often been surprised,” claims Moretti here, “by how limited the diffusion of bourgeois values seems to have actually been. Capitalism has spread everywhere, no doubt about that, but the values that—according to Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart, Sigmund Freud, Joseph Schumpeter, Albert Hirschmann, and others—are supposed to be most congruous with it have not” (8; my emphasis).

In The Politics of the Possible, Kumkum Sangari notes the ease with which the novel accommodates the different. “The expansive forms of the modern and the postmodern novel appear to stand in ever-polite readiness to recycle and accommodate other cultural content, whether Latin American or Indian” (157).
García Márquez subvert the virtues traditionally exemplified by the realist novel and the
originary imperial epic to refresh sterile and exhausted forms.

Although I am interested in these two authors’ portrayal of the marvelous within
the real, I do not seek to settle this portrayal within a critical history of magical realism.
What magical realism is or isn’t remains a topic of immense (though perhaps waning)
critical interest, which has been tackled by various experts since the heyday of the Latin
American Boom.10 I do not wish to add to this already dense critical discussion.11 I am

10 In the 60s and 70s, critical discussions concerning magical realism’s ability to question the status quo
gained ground. Aimée González considered magical realism a “new angle of vision” from which to look at
reality. Aurora Ocampo considered it a “new attitude” or way of understanding the real. Suzanne Levine
argued that the genre espoused the extraordinary as real, and the real as extraordinary, and Irlímar Chiampi
considered it to be a new way of “normalizing” the rebellious or fantastic elements of the real. According to
Ángel Flores, “Meticulous craftsmen all, one finds in [magical realist writers] the same preoccupation with
style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal”
(190). In magical realism, writes Flores, “the unreal, happens as part of reality.” For Stephen Hart, “in the
magical–realist world the marvelous or magical is never presented as something unexpected or unusual”
(188). For Leal, “Para captar los misterios de la realidad, el escritor magicorrealista exalta sus sentidos hasta
un estado límite que le permite adivinar los inadvertidos matices del mundo externo, ese multiforme mundo
en que vivimos” (“To get a hold of the mysteries of reality, the magical realist writer sharpens his senses to a
state of liminality, which allows him to perceive the indiscernible elements of the external world, of the
multiform world that we live in”) (232; my translation).

Following Octavio Paz, the critic Paul M. Hedeen argues that the Buendía family symbolizes “primal
solitude.” For Hedeen, magic in Macondo is imported, “ancient” and “fertile.” It was the gypsy Melquiádes,
claims Hedeen, who first “brought magic and wisdom to the town and the Buendías.” The “innocent and
childlike people of Macondo,” he argues, accept “magical things” as “part of their reality” (352). They are
fooled into thinking that “commonplace objects—magnets, magnifying glasses, ice—are mysterious and
magical.” For Fredric Jameson, in García Márquez’s works we find a “transfigured object world in which
fantastic events are also narrated” (304). From García Márquez onwards, argues Jameson, “magic realism
now comes to be understood as a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society,
drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth.”

In this dissertation, I explore the distinct methods by which García Márquez and Conrad approach and
understand reality. These authors, I claim, plausibly incorporate the “indiscernible elements of the external
world” into the real. I am not interested so much in the magical “transformation” of the unreal into the real
as in the self-aware integration of the unforeseeable into the narrative fabric of the real through strategies of
romance and storytelling.

11 In his article, “Rereading ‘Magic Realism,’” Tamás Bényei challenges critical readings of magical realism
which are “implicitly based on binarism between the real and the supernatural.” For him, the relationship
simply proposing here a new way to read these two authors’ enchanted depiction of the real by focusing on their use of tales, digression and craft. A careful survey of these two authors reveals that their magical elements emerge from a more or less implicit background of *techne* and linguistic specificity.

Lastly, this dissertation treats history in a literary rather than a literal sense. I situate Conrad and García Márquez’s “realist romances,” as I come to call them in my first chapter, within a timeline of literary movements. I explore these authors’ particular use of literary elements to depict worlds at the boundaries of empire. I am also interested in what these literary tropes reveal about potentially real but sometimes ineffable historical and political circumstances, such as paramilitarism, extractive economic practices directed from afar and the disenfranchisement of local ways of knowing and saying. By resorting to stories and to vernacular idioms associated with craft, these two authors address the displacement and mystification that follow the violent imposition of narratives of order, progress and development.

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between the two terms (magic and realism) is “not one of opposition or synthesis” but of containment and contradiction. The difference between the real and the magical is, for him, “an internal difference already present in both.” Since both magic and realism are basically mimetic activities, magic is “always already inside realism as an insistence, even an informing lack” (158). In “The Politics of the Possible,” Sangari argues that García Márquez's marvelous realism is “a mode of perception grounded in the political and historical formation of Latin America. Not just the inscription of the marvelous in the real is produced by the colonial history and cultural heterogeneity of Latin America—the disjunctures in the understanding of the real are equally mediated by and refracted through the apparatus of various kinds of domination, colonial and neocolonial, underwritten by feudal survivals and reactive nationalisms” (158). For a comprehensive survey of recent critical definitions of magical realism, see Llarena 21–44.
Overview of the Argument

In the first chapter of this dissertation, “Theoretical Underpinnings,” I lay down the theoretical grounds required to sustain the comparative analysis that I will carry out in the subsequent chapters. I make the argument that Conrad and García Márquez’s stylistics in many of the major works depends on a vocabulary of wonder that emerges from particular characters’ technical mastery of their crafts. I make use of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” to lay out a key affiliation between the practice of craft and the telling and transmitting of stories. I turn to Hannah Arendt’s seminal book The Human Condition (1958) to explore how stories are integrated into the fabric of the everyday. For Arendt, stories allow their tellers to create and recreate worlds, to transform experience into knowledge. I use Arendt’s ideas about alienation to discuss how economies that deny man’s ability to know and experience material personally and directly are alienating and antisocial. From Max Weber’s Vocational Lectures (1919), I develop a key link between the unmediated pursuit of vocation and the possibility of enchanting and making polytheistic a disenchanted and monotheistic world. The various forms of seeing and knowing that are possible for Conrad’s and García Márquez’s storytelling craftsmen question the univocality of an Enlightened, universalizing and self-assured teleology of progress.

12 For Arendt, automated work—the “release of human labor power”—cannot inspire “the same contentment as fabrication and production of a new object” (The Human Condition 328). “The workers in a factory,” argues Arendt, have always been laborers, and though they may have excellent reasons for self-respect, it certainly cannot arise from the work they do.” “One can only hope,” continues Arendt, “that they themselves will not accept the social substitutes for contentment and self-respect offered them by labor theorists [such as John Diebold], who by now really believe that the interest in work and the satisfaction of craftsmanship can be replaced by ‘human relations’ and by the respect workers ‘earn from their fellow workers.’”
In the second chapter of this dissertation, “Craft Interrupted,” I explore certain instances in the novels and tales of Conrad and García Márquez in which the practice of craft is inhibited. The deformation of craft, I argue here, leads to the deformation of stories and of people’s ability to use stories as means of knowing the world. I read Conrad’s story “The Secret Sharer” alongside García Márquez’s “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” to establish a relation between craft and its practitioners’ ability to see with renewed clarity what is before them. In these two works, the integration of the strange and the unknown into a comprehensive narrative practice happens through the execution of manual practices—sailing and sewing, in particular. I turn to *Heart of Darkness* and *No One Writes to the Colonel* to explore the obfuscations and mystifications that result from attempts to interpret the world in a context which is separate from everyday practice and knowledge. Here again the making of clothes and the captaining of ships emerge as possible avenues by which to defy obscuring and ideologically charged narratives of progress and deliverance. Lastly, I explore Conrad’s and García Márquez’s deployment of stories and storytellers in *Lord Jim* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to defy authoritative yet misguided epistemes and ideologies. I argue that Conrad and García Márquez modify stories to describe characters and situations that are alienated—cut off from the conditions of production and creation and from vernacular forms of seeing and experiencing.

The third chapter of this dissertation, “From Something Base, Something Great,” contrasts *Nostromo* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*’s depiction of extractive economies. Mr. Gould’s silver mine in *Nostromo* and Mr. Brown’s banana plantation in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* devastate the local landscape and culture—drying up waterways and severing locals from their land and their cultural practices. They perpetuate violence and obfuscating ideology. Conrad’s and García Márquez’s narrators
use stories to confront a mine and a plantation’s misleading accounts of their procedures. By resorting to narrative perspectives informed and shaped by the practice of craft, these two authors reveal the paralegal and phantasmagoric methods used by these foreign-led enterprises to establish control over peripheral communities. I argue that these two authors’ interest in alternative processes of value-generation and in craft-based epistemes manifests itself in their use of alchemical transmutations. The alchemical metaphor of the stream of water, the Aqua Regis, is not one of desiccation and extraction, but of perpetual regeneration and reduplication. Building on the juxtaposition between extraction and creation, this chapter explores to what extent alchemy and vernacular storytelling are related.

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, “Progress Romanced,” I focus on García Márquez’s and Joseph Conrad’s use of the elements of romance to depict worlds in which action itself appears to be digressive, disordered and haphazard, despite its assertions to the contrary. This circuitous depiction is ultimately more realistic than depictions which insist on portraying the world as ordered. I begin with a reading of Marlow’s pointed use of the word “progress” in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Marlow’s technical and literal use of that word to describe his ship’s distance of travel exists alongside the Belgian emissaries’ ideologically charged use of the same word, which in their mouths is practically a byword for genocide. I then turn to the unfulfilled expectations of García Márquez’s No One Writes to the Colonel. I argue that, in that novel, digression, delay and evasion are not obstacles to be conquered (as they are, for example, in the initial temporizing of the hero in the epic), but integral, indeed unavoidable, components of the

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13 Aqua regia, a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid, dissolves gold and platinum. According to Paracelsus, the celebrated mystic and alchemist of the Renaissance, “aqua regis” can be used to multiply quantities of gold.
fabric of the everyday. I conclude that by means of the elements of romance—chance, repetition and digression—Conrad and García Márquez manage to depict realities that appear enchanted but nevertheless are buttressed by the facts of experience.
Part 2. Context

*Seasoned Wiles: The Sailor and the Reporter*

Several critics have acknowledged links between Conrad and García Márquez in passing, but few have gone into great depth.14 In “Vueltas en redondo: En torno a Gabriel García Márquez,” the Argentine critic Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda argues that *Nostromo* is “un libro más próximo a *Cien años de Soledad* de lo que se cree” ‘a book much nearer to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* than is generally thought’ (3). In “Conrad’s Influence on Modern Writers,” Jeffrey Meyers maintains that Conrad is the preeminent influence on the procedures of the Latin American novel: “Conrad’s influence, via Faulkner, on the teeming, thickly vegetated, formless, and overwritten Latin American novels of Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, is pervasive, though not always fortunate” (187). Gene Moore has called *Nostromo* the “first epic novel of colonial Latin America”; and, for that reason, he goes on to claim that, it “stands at the origin of a tradition that leads to the panoramic chronicles of writers like Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, or Augusto Roa Bastos” (224). The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’O claims that Conrad and García Márquez “were drawing from the same well of post-colonial Latin American history.” The “sweep of history and dictatorships that litter

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14 In *The Dawn Watch* (2017), Maya Jasanoff links Conrad’s sweeping influence to his status as “an immigrant, a traveler, and, not least, a writer in nonnative language.” Conrad, she adds, has been “at once a model and a bête noire to post-colonial authors from Achebe to V. S. Naipaul. He has turned up in the pages of Latin American writers from Jorge Luis Borges to Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Juan Gabriel Vásquez” (314).
the social landscape of *One Hundred Years of Solitude,*” he concludes, “is reminiscent of *Nostromo.*”

Jean Franco’s “The Limits of the Liberal Imagination: *One Hundred Years of Solitude,*” is perhaps the most interesting comparative study of García Márquez and Joseph Conrad. Franco contrasts *Nostromo*’s depiction of life in a “dependent country” to life in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*’s Macondo. Franco’s argument is centered around questions of dependency. García Márquez’s characters, she claims, are “free” but uniquely liable to become dependent (because free). Conrad’s Europeans are not free, and they impose the ideals they represent upon other, non-European landscapes.

According to Franco, “the tragedy of Sulaco is conceived in terms of the Europeans, who are corrupted because their ambitions are acted out upon the stage of a dependent nation” (201). Charles Gould in Conrad’s *Nostromo,* she argues, “represented the thousands of European dreamers who saw the continent as an empty canvas on which to sketch their enterprises.” Contrariwise, “the tragedy of Macondo, is that of a dependent population whose imagination is no longer inviolate” (202). García

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15 In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said argues that Conrad’s *Nostromo* is “the precursor of the Western views of the Third World which one finds in the work of novels as different as Graham Green, V.S. Naipaul, and Robert Stone” (xvii-xviii). However, he claims, “it would be incomplete to read Conrad’s great work simply as a prediction of what we see happening in twentieth-century Latin America, with its string of United Fruit Companies, colonels, liberation forces and American-financed mercenaries.” Conrad’s “Western view of the non-Western world,” continues Said, “is so ingrained as to blind him to other histories, other cultures, other aspirations. All Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West.” Conrad’s view of the non-Western world, I agree with Said, may be limited, but it is infinitely richer than Said suggests here. Conrad’s portrait of the Republic of Costaguana is an imaginative, panoramic attempt to describe other people at the periphery.

16 Dependency theory originated in Argentina in the 1950s and gained greater prominence in Latin America in the 60s and 70s. It argues that underdevelopment is the direct result of capital intervention, rather than a condition of lacking development or investment. The constraints imposed by the political and economic center on the periphery result in a vicious cycle that further perpetuates the division of the world between a rich core and a poor periphery. For a brief survey, see Chilcote 4–29 and Weeks 118–23.
Márquez’s characters, claims Franco, are “not representative.” They do not stand for anything other than themselves. The Buendías live strange, indifferent lives. Their disavowal of specialization and the accumulation of capital is anachronistically preindustrial—ahistorical. Macondo is blessed, she continues, because it is unalienated and free. García Márquez turns culture’s technique of differentiation inside out to imagine an alternative reality for Latin America. Macondo takes as possible the seemingly impossible. It’s García Márquez’s Latin American idyll—a haven for “the liberal ideal of respect for individual freedom, the possibility of self-development with as little authoritarian or arbitrary interference as possible, and ‘civilized’ discourse and relationships” (211).

That neglect is potentially freeing and generative is García Márquez at his most idealistic—or so Jean Franco argues. The same characteristics that make Macondo idyllic also make it apocalyptic, uniquely liable to foreign invasions and natural catastrophes. Because Macondo can “never rejoin the reality of the present,” it is doomed to be apart from history, “exiled from the memories of men” (212). Franco is making the basic point that, despite the imaginative and aesthetically pleasing texts of García Márquez and his coeivals, Latin America is not in fact an untrammeled natural paradise. The “privileged space” of Macondo, concludes Franco, “is constantly invaded by alien forces and is susceptible to destruction by natural catastrophe” (211).

Although she resists the term independence, Franco’s comparative reading of Nostromo and One Hundred Years of Solitude draws binaries too strictly between dependence and independence.” I am skeptical of Franco’s suggestion that Macondo is

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17 In “The Rhetoric of Development in Conrad’s Nostromo,” Ramirez argues that Conrad’s Nostromo “continually shifts power between mestizo rebels like the Monteros, presidential figureheads like Ribiera, and opportunists like Sir John of the Railway” (93). In so doing, she continues, “Conrad complicates facile
an intrinsically “privileged” space whose innate ability to live freely is constantly being thwarted by foreign invasion and natural catastrophe. My argument throughout this dissertation is that the violent interruption and the subsequent devaluation of local forms of doing and saying lead to impoverishment. Autonomy becomes possible through the reappropriation and revaluation of tales grounded in craft and vernacular practices. It leads to multiplicity in human perception, rather than binarism. Although this autonomy can be taken away, it is not a given.

Other critics have noted other, subtler intertextual connections between Conrad and García Márquez. In “Conrad and Contemporary Writers,” David Miller argues perceptively that the title of García Márquez’s most popular novel alludes directly to *Nostromo*: “García Márquez calls his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, surely smiling at the title of *Fifty Years of Misrule*, the book by Don José Avellanos that Conrad

18 Other comparative studies of Conrad and García Márquez do exist, although they are scant. The Italian critic Fabrizio Scriviano compares García Márquez’s depiction of the stream of consciousness in *The General in his Labyrinth* to Conrad’s in *Heart of Darkness*. Each author’s imagined “metropolis,” he argues, arises from “the space temporal structures of logic” rather than from “the lexemic developments of language” (137). Lee Sangok’s “Conrad vs. Márquez: Their Visions of History” argues that both novels study the effect of politics on the fate of individuals. However, Conrad’s approach to history, claims Lee, is modern and García Márquez’s postmodern. Claudia Benassi’s PhD dissertation, “Conquering History: Conrad’s *Nostromo* and García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as Counter-Historical Novels,” compares how these works inquire into “the relation between history and human consciousness” (15). Both works, she argues, raise questions about the nature of Latin American reality. In her article “Where is Costaguana?” Benassi considers Colombia to be “the major source for *Nostromo* in as much the same way as Congo is understood by everybody to have been the inspiration and scenario for *Heart of Darkness*” (204).
says he uses when researching his own novel” (168). Other critics have noted that the historical Conrad makes a cameo appearance as a gun-runner in Love in the Time of Cholera (1985). Lorenzo Daza, writes García Márquez, “había sido el intermediario entre el gobierno del presidente liberal Aquileo Parra y un tal Joseph T. K. Korzeniowski, polaco de origen, que estuvo demorado aquí varios meses en la tripulación del mercante Saint Antoine, de bandera francesa, tratando de definir un confuso negocio de armas” ‘had been the intermediary between the government of the liberal president Aquileo Parra and one Joseph T. K. Korzeniowski, a native of Poland and a member of the crew of the merchant ship Saint Antoine, sailing under the French flag, who had spent several months here trying to conclude a complicated arms deal’ (461; 319). Lorenzo Daza is Fermina Daza’s wealthy father. Fermina, in turn, is the love object of Florentino Ariza, the novel’s hopelessly Wertherian protagonist. Daza opposes Fermina’s marriage to

19 Conrad’s José Avellanos is based on the Colombian diplomat and writer Santiago Pérez Triana. Pérez Triana was the son of Santiago Pérez Manosalbas, a liberal politician and man of letters who served as president of the United States of Colombia from 1874 to 1876. When the conservative party came to power in Colombia in 1900, Santiago Perez Triana was exiled to Europe. Robert Cunningham Graham, a Scottish-Spanish aristocrat who lived between Europe and South America, and whose occupation ranged from cowboy to fencing master to socialist to renowned author, introduced Conrad to Pérez Triana in London in the early 1900s. Conrad mentions Pérez Triana in one of his letters to Cunningham Graham (Dec. 1903). Triana, writes Conrad, “has written to me the kindest letter imaginable, offering information, even introductions” (Conrad’s Letters to R.B. 149) In the same letter Conrad condemns American intervention in Panama: “And à propos what do you think of the Yankee Conquistadores in Panama? Pretty, isn’t it? Enfin.” According to Cedric Watts a “particularly bitter critic of the United States’ territorial ambitions in South America was Graham’s friend and correspondent, Don Santiago Pérez Triana, who was later to be prominent at the Hague Peace Conferences . . . was introduced by Graham to Conrad” and, as Conrad’s letter of 31 October 1904 makes clear, “became the model on which characterization of Don José Avellanos was based.” “I am compunctious as to the use I’ve made of the impression produced upon me by the Exim Sr Don Perez Triana’s personality. Do you think I have committed an unforgivable fault there? He’ll never see or hear the book probably” (158). Pérez Triana’s ideas, claims Watts, “doubtless contributed to those of Don José Avellanos in the novel” (158). Don Santiago Pérez Triana not only appears as Don José Avellanos in Nostromo but also as “the Minister of Costalarga” in Cunningham Graham’s “A Belly-God.”

20 Translations of Love in the Times of Cholera are taken from Edith Grossman’s 1988 English translation of the novel.
Ariza, whom he considers too lower class to marry his daughter—an opposition which provides a springboard for the episodic development of the novel as series of unfulfilling and unofficial affairs.

The story of Conrad’s passage through the unidentified port city in which *Love in the Times of Cholera* is set as a framed tale. It appears in the town’s newspaper, *La Justicia*, in an article which accuses Daza of a series of disconnected and fraudulent crimes—some of which are frame-ups. The contents of the article are not cited, but recounted by the novel’s narrator. The newspaper blames Daza for the chemical, almost magical, alteration of one-dollar bills into hundred-dollar bills. “Era un fraude maestro, pues los billetes tenían las marcas de agua del papel original: habían borrado billetes de un dólar por un procedimiento químico que parecía cosa de magia, y habían impreso en su lugar billetes de a cien” ‘It was a masterful fraud, for the bills had the watermarks of the original paper: one-dollar bills had been erased by a chemical process that seemed to be magic, and reprinted as hundred-dollar notes.’ (175; 319). It also blames Daza for artfully mixing tobacco meant for exportation with shredded pieces of paper, “de un modo tan hábil, que ni los fumadores refinados notaban el engaño” ‘which he did with so much skill that not even the most sophisticated smokers noticed the deception. (175; 322).

García Márquez’s framing tactics in this passage allow him to add a convincing veneer of plausibility to Daza’s unbelievable acts. By enclosing Daza’s crimes in a pseudo-journalistic frame, García Márquez grants himself access to the tricks of journalism—factual accountability and verisimilitude—tricks which he uses to transform his stories. Journalism was for many years what he did to earn his bread—his craft, in other words. Daza’s criminal feats emerge as possible images of García Márquez’s own literary feats. Daza is a skilled artificer who incorporates without being detected
extraneous elements into familiar containers (i.e., shredded pieces of paper into cigars) or transfigures through audacious chemical means the printed word (i.e., 1-dollar bills into 100-dollar bills). García Márquez’s skilled use of tales—a skill which is reflective of his own journalistic practice—transforms and subverts the narrative power of the printed word through a series of incrustations and reduplications. His novelistic journalism, as Aníbal González notes in his article “The Ends of the Text,” violates our “expectations of causality” (68). It paints a picture of a disordered world in which repetition, coincidence and polyphony triumph over empiricism, authoritarianism and monosemy.

Daza’s affair with Joseph T. K. is just one more in a long series of fraudulent schemes and artifices. This encounter is characterized by delay and uncertainty. Daza runs into Korzeniowski because Korzeniowski’s affair was “demorado” ‘delayed.’ Korzeniowski, we are told, is waiting in hopes of wrapping up a complicated arms deal. Whether this deal does or does not eventually come off remains ambiguous, as does Daza’s actual involvement in it. All we know is that he is a committed “intermediary.”

The use of historical, nautical and political detail in this story (“French flag,” “merchant ship,” “Aquileo Parra,” “Saint Antoine” and “arms deal”) anchor this confusing, inconclusive, evidently fictional encounter in historical and factual reality.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) For a clever analysis of García Márquez’s use of the rhetorical stratagems of journalism in his tales and novels, see Aníbal González’s “The Ends of Text.” In “Big Mama’s Funeral,” argues González, “the discourse of journalism demonstrates the existence not only of civil liberties (a common cliché about journalism) but also, and more significantly, of textual liberties” (64). The story’s “recourse to journalism’s immediacy and penchant for detail becomes a liberating gesture after the endless years of Big Mama’s stultifying ideological abstractions” (65).

\(^{22}\) The evidence about Conrad’s involvement in the historical version of this affair, it shouldn’t surprise us, is also inconclusive. In 1876, as steward in the Saint Antoine, Conrad sailed for the first and last time across the Caribbean. The Saint Antoine was transporting coal from St. Thomas to Haiti (Kammen). According to the records of the Saint Antoine, Conrad never left the West Indies and never reached South America proper. Knowles and Moore, in the Oxford Reader’s Companion to Conrad (2000), maintain that “the Saint Antoine stayed in the Saint-Pierre roads and did not, contrary to Conrad’s intimations, visit ports in Colombia and
In a short article published in 2000 in La Nación de Neiva, a provincial daily newspaper from Western Colombia, García Márquez claimed that Conrad’s Colombian sojourn was not an instance of “magical realism,” but a factual occurrence: “el episodio es verídico y con respaldo documental” ‘the episode is true and backed with evidence.’

The first time he read Nostromo, García Márquez felt that Conrad must, at some point in his life, have visited the Colombian shore—there were too many parallels between Sulaco and the Caribbean city of Santa Marta: “me sorprendió que su descripción del puerto caribe de Zulaco [sic], donde transcurre la acción, tenía un parecido casi fotográfico con la ciudad colombiana de Santa Marta. Sobre todo por la bahía abrigada y mansa frente a la montaña de nieves perpetuas en el trópico puro” ‘I was surprised that his description of the Caribbean port of Sulaco, where the action of the novel unfolds, had an almost photographic resemblance to the Colombian city of Santa Marta. In particular, the sheltered and calm bay, bordering a range of snowy peaked mountains in the heart of the tropics’ (my translation). Conrad’s description of the port of Sulaco is so true to life—a fidelity which only the exacting eye of a mariner could have apprehended—that it convinces García Márquez that there is a particular Colombian reality which lies behind Costaguana. One needn’t be a “novelista delirante” ‘delirious novelist,’ continues García Venezuela” (xx). Conrad’s letters, however, indicate otherwise. “It remains possible,” continue Knowles and Moore, “that Conrad and Cervoni absented themselves temporarily and unofficially from their ship.” Almost 30 years after his sojourn in the Saint Antoine, Conrad wrote to Cunningham Grahame: “I am dying over that cursed Nostromo thing. All my memories of Central America seem to slip away. I just had a glimpse 25 years ago—a short glance. That is not enough pour battir un roman dessus” (Conrad’s Letters to R.B. 152). In 1923, in a letter to Richard Curie, Conrad again reminisces about the couple of days he spent onshore Colombia and Venezuela: “…Puerto Cabello where I was ashore about twelve hours. In Laguayra as I went up the hill and had a distant view of Caracas, I must have been two and half to three days. It’s such a long time ago! And there were a few hours in a few other places in that dreary coast of Venezuela” (Aubry 315).

By far the more interesting account of Conrad’s possible sojourn in Latin America is Juan Gabriel Vásquez’s 2007 historical-novel The Secret History of Costaguana.
Márquez, to suspect that Conrad visited Colombia: “entrado en la historia de Colombia por la puerta prohibida de un cargamento de armas” ‘ barging into Colombian history through the forbidden door of arms dealing’ (my translation). Conrad’s cameo in Love in the Time of Cholera exemplifies the use of romance strategies and storytelling tactics to enchant the real—a method which makes García Márquez’s work comparable to Conrad’s in a novel and fruitful way.

If García Márquez relied on his practical knowledge of the journalist’s craft to enchant and render his stories realistic, Conrad relied on his experience as a sailor to do the same. 23 Conrad was a confabulator, an expert spinner of tales within tales—an expertise which is not separable from his years long practice as mariner. 24 In A Personal Record (1912), his digressive, embellished autobiography, Conrad traces the genesis and eventual execution of his first novel, Almayer’s Folly (1895). “It was in latitude 40 south, and nearly in the longitude of Greenwich,” he writes, “that the quiet rites of Almayer’s and Nina’s resurrection were taking place” (39). Conrad’s autobiography is a self-dramatization of the whelping of a storyteller, which is inseparable from seamanship. “Was [Almayer’s Folly] intelligent in its action?” he asks himself, as if “already the storyteller were being born into the body of a seaman.” Conrad responds to his own question (“is it intelligent in its action?”) neither exegetically nor explicitly. Instead, he draws on the technical and vernacular language of the sea. Rather than a direct answer, all he hears are acoustical nautical fragments: an officer’s whistle and a sailor’s command: “the

23 Joseph Conrad, argues Margaret Cohen in The Novel and the Sea, “was interested in the difficulty of teaching the situation specific creativity of craft and drew attention to its importance in his fiction” (33). Conrad’s romance of navigation, is a “thoroughly secular romance of men at work; a romance of human practice” (4).

24 “Almost none of what he said,” observes Maya Jasanoff “lines up with other records” (51).
whistle of the officer of the watch” and an order that “reached” him “as a faint, fierce shout to ‘Square the yards’” (39).

In his 1918 essay, “Tradition,” Conrad writes:

From the hard work of men are born the sympathetic consciousnesses of a common destiny, the fidelity to right practice which makes great craftsmen, the sense of right conduct which we may call honour, the devotion to our calling and the idealism which is not a misty, winged angel without eyes, but a divine figure of terrestrial aspect with a clear glance and with its feet resting firmly on the earth on which it was born (153).

For Conrad, the “hard work of men” is the source of humanity’s “common destiny” and its “honor.” In this patently Anglophilic essay, “hard work” is both the genesis of and the complement to a clear-eyed idealism—both “divine” and “terrestrial.”

In *King Leopold’s Ghost*, Hochschild argues that *Heart of Darkness* “is one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature, but its author, curiously, thought himself an ardent imperialist where England was concerned” (146). Conrad “fully recognized Leopold’s rape of the Congo for what it was.” Yet, “almost in the same breath, Marlow talks about how the British territories colored red on a world map were ‘good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done there.’” Conrad’s “love of his adoptive country,” continues Hochschild, “knew no bounds.” In “The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*,” the critic Frances Singh argues that Conrad felt that “liberty” could “only be found under the English flag all over the world” (42).

For Achebe, Marlow’s approach to “truth” is conveniently and characteristically English. Marlow “comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever” (787). The “kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad,” claims Achebe, “almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people.”

In *Conrad and Imperialism* (1983), Benita Parry discusses Conrad’s contradictory and complicated attitude to England, his adoptive country. Conrad’s veneration of work, duty and fidelity, implicitly approves of an imperialism he would have otherwise condemned. In his response to Parry, Hunt Hawkins claims that Conrad did not favor “dutiful work blindly, independently of aims.” Marlow, argues Hawkins, condemns the accountant’s efficiency in *Heart of Darkness*—an efficiency that is oblivious to “the moans of the sick agent and the ‘grove of death’” (171).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said claims that Conrad was “both criticizing and reproducing the imperial ideology of his time, to that extent we can characterize our own present attitudes: the projection, or

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devotion to his calling is the source of his artistic practice and creation, which is both earthbound and celestial. Meanwhile, the work of men estranged from the earth has lost all but the most abstracted connection with the land—leading to a misty-eyed sort of idealism.

Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity* discusses the precision and expertise that was expected of British sailors at the turn of the 20th century. Sailors (because of their commitment to their trade) became the ensign citizens of 19th-century England. The “sailing officer,” says Trilling, “was admired as the exemplar of a professional code which prescribed an uncompromising commitment to duty” (111). And, “not least among his traits which inspired respect was his ability to meet the practical demands of an exigent trade, his technical competence painfully acquired through an apprenticeship which began in his boyhood” (my emphasis). English seamen were revered by a wide swath of society for their technical expertise and their devotion to their craft. “Conrad’s Marlow,” continues Trilling, “speaks of work, which he also calls ‘efficiency,’ as the great device—by implication peculiarly English—for getting through life with fortitude and dignity.”

A “sailor’s phrase” writes Conrad in his collection of seafaring essays, *The Mirror of the Sea*, “has all the precision, and imagery of technical language that, created by simple men with keen eyes for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade, achieves the just expression seizing upon the essential” (21). The language of the refusal, of the wish to dominate, the capacity to damn, or the energy to comprehend and engage with other societies, traditions, histories” (xviii). It seems to me that *Nostromo*, if anything, is an image of Conrad’s energetic devotion to the comprehension of a different culture—that this comprehension might be biased, is another matter.

26 The story Marlow tells in *Youth: A Narrative* (1898) “could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak—the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel, or of bread-winning” (4).
professional sailor is not only technical and precise—it also always aims at capturing the real aspect of what is seen. Paradoxically, this emphasis on capturing the real ends up leading to unexpected accounts of the marvelous. In Chance (1913), Marlow explains that “The exacting life of the sea has this advantage over the life of the earth, that its claims are simple and cannot be evaded” (34). A captain’s instructions in a time of crisis cannot but be utterly precise. But sailors also ramble, maunder and gab.

Conrad’s description of anchors in The Mirror of Sea (1906) combines technical and inventive language to redescribe the mundane. This is how he enchants the world through practical experience. “Anchors,” writes a mildly irritated Conrad, are “never ‘cast’” (13). Before “an anchor can ever be raised,” he informs his landlubber readers, “it must be let go. And this perfectly obvious truism brings me at once to the subject of the degradation of the sea language in the daily press of this country.” Journalists (whose livelihood depends on the sensational dissemination of fact) cannot know that “an anchor is never cast.” And to say that an anchor is cast is, for Conrad, “to take a liberty with technical language,” a liberty that “is a crime against the clearness, precision, and beauty of perfected speech.” If García Márquez was able to use the technical repertoire of the journalist to ground his marvelous depictions in the real, Conrad condemned the looseness with which land-bound journalists treated the speech of the sea.

27 “In the professional use of language that was part of seamanship,” argues Margaret Cohen in The Novel and the Sea, “originality was irrelevant—what mattered were veracity, precision and legibility. Indeed, originality could even be harmful. In written documents, particularly describing unknown coasts and waters, conventional and recognizable terminology was an advantage. When officers uttered commands across a ship’s deck amidst howling winds, the more familiar terms were, the more easily they could be recognized” (36). Practical treatises “on the language of seamanship,” continues Cohen, “sought to fix words and phrases, stabilizing the maritime lexicon.” Similarly, “How-to manuals” reproduced “entire passages in the name of consistent and collective knowledge.”
Conrad’s antipathy towards the imprecise language of journalists is the corollary of his own expert use of nautical terms—an expertise which then allows him to give credence to sensational instances without sensationalizing them. An anchor, he continues punctiliously, “is a forged piece of iron, admirably adapted to its end, and technical language is an instrument wrought into perfection by ages of experience, a flawless thing for its purpose.” The real and exacting history of how anchors are talked about has created a sort of finicky beauty, which is worthy of praise in terms that exceed the real—the terms of Conrad’s grand rhetoric of stories.28 Conrad’s experientially grounded, objective knowledge of the anchor gives rise to his personal adulation of the very same object.

Conrad’s veneration of the anchor as a carefully wrought instrument (“to its perfection, its size bears witness”) is inseparable from his admiration of the language in which its movements are correctly described. In the words of Mark D. Larabee, “to write inaccurately of ‘casting’ it overboard represents a symbolic (if inadvertent) jettisoning of fidelity” (72). The verb “cast” refers to an action that fixes, immobilizes. “To let go” is a phrasal verb—a description of an action unresolved, evocative of release rather than of containment or conclusion. It is also, unsurprisingly, a more accurate depiction of the process by which a ship is anchored—an anchor is not cast like a fishing rod, but simply dropped into the sea.

For Conrad there is beauty in this phrase because techne and diction coincide. It is only after having described the anchor in terms scientific and precise that Conrad allows himself to write poetically: “Were [anchors] made of gold they would look like

28 A grandiloquence of the real that Conrad turns into something else, which he understands as “romanticism.” This “romanticism,” Conrad argues in his preface to Within the Tides (1915), is “not a sin.” And it “is none the worse for the knowledge of truth. It only tries to make the best of it, hard as it may be; and this hardness discovers a certain aspect of beauty” (viii).
trinkets.” They’d be “like ornamental toys,” he continues, “no bigger in proportion than a jeweled drop in a woman’s ear” (14). Conrad allows himself to describe anchors in a language that is approximate, figurative, and even whimsical only after he has proven his real, experiential familiarity with the object. Unlike the journalists he scorns, Conrad takes stylistic liberties only after he has established his thorough technical knowledge of the object in discussion. Technical experience is not detrimental to creative invention; it is its handmaiden.

Conrad and García Márquez seem to possess what Hannah Arendt called “the rare gift of thinking poetically” (50; my emphasis). This thinking, she wrote, is “fed by the present,” but can “wrest from the past.” It’s like a “pearl diver” who “descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light” but to “pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the corals in the depths” and “to carry them to the surface” (50-51).²⁹ In the works of Conrad and García Márquez, language is used to narrate the implausible only after it has first been mastered. And language is mastered with the help of experience. Experience, in turn, is gained in the earth, through the committed devotion to a particular craft (such as pearl diving).

²⁹ Here Arendt is alluding to Walter Benjamin’s fragmentary, magpie style of writing. She illuminates this form of “poetical thinking” with the aid of Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s Tempest. Ariel’s beautiful, grotesque, inorganic image of eyes made of coral has importance as a guide to the style of Conrad and García Márquez, in the obvious sense of the beautiful and the transcendental that emerges from careful observation of the mundane.
The Yellow Butterflies

Yellow butterflies appear in Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1899) and in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The image of the yellow butterfly reveals these authors’ shared commitment to stories that elucidate but do not designate. Stories are born of generative practices and are themselves engines of regeneration. Their accounts of yellow butterflies reflect a shared interest in craft and its ability to produce and shape tales. Through the figure of the yellow butterfly, these two authors defy attempts to interpret the world through abstractions, categorizations and prognostications—the methods of the lepidopterist. In their works the intricacies of the butterfly are visible to those whose eyesight has been sharpened by the experience of a different craft. The pinning and preservation of butterflies in their desiccated forms stand in contrast to more invigorating and collective forms of seeing, knowing and loving that stories make possible and which these two authors deploy in their works.

In Chapter 19 of *Lord Jim*, about halfway through the novel, we are introduced to Stein, a “wealthy and respected merchant” with a “large inter-island business” (154). Stein collects animals that he classifies and preserves. Stein, says Marlow, “never failed to annex on *his own account* every butterfly or beetle he could lay *hands on*” (156–57; my emphasis). Marlow seeks Stein’s advice because he is worried about Jim, his protégé. Marlow is worried because Jim is again homeless—no longer welcome in Bangkok, his most recent domicile.31

30 “Soul, eye, and hand,” says Benjamin, “are connected” with the words the storyteller utters. Through “their interaction” they “define a practice”—a practice which is “no longer familiar to us.”

31 Jim is associated with discontinuity throughout *Lord Jim*. “His incognito,” says Marlow, “which had as many holes as a sieve, was not meant to hide a personality but a fact. When the fact broke through the incognito he would leave suddenly the seaport where he happened to be at the time and go to another—
The ambience puffing forth from Stein’s pipe offers an ideal setting for the unhurried telling of a tale. Having listened to Marlow’s story of Jim—the contents of which are not disclosed to us readers—Stein “uncrossed his legs, laid down his pipe, leaned forwards towards [Marlow] earnestly with his elbows on the arms of his chair, the tips of his fingers together” and provided his diagnosis of the situation: “I understand very well. [Jim] is a Romantic” (162).

The centerpiece of Marlow’s conversation with Stein is Stein’s story of an elusive yellow butterfly. Stein’s “hand,” says Marlow, “hovered over the case where a butterfly in solitary grandeur spread out dark bronze wings, seven inches or more across, with exquisite white veinings and a gorgeous border of yellow spots” (156). Stein finally captures this “rare specimen” while serving as commercial agent in the Celebes Islands. While standing over the corpse of one of his ambushers, he discerns its shadow: “And as I looked at his face for some sign of life I observed something like a faint shadow pass over his forehead. It was the shadow of this butterfly. Look at the form of the wing. This species fly high with a strong flight. I raised my eyes and saw him fluttering away” (160). Here Stein is seeing life where there isn’t any—his ambusher is dead; the rare butterfly is dead as well. Having caught it, he cites Goethe’s Torquato Tasso: “So halt’ ich’s endlich den in meinen Haenden” ‘So finally I hold it in my hands’ (162; my translation; my emphasis). Stein uses his hands to capture, and then fix the material objects of his desire.

Marlow observes “the intense, almost passionate, absorption with which [Stein] looked at a butterfly, as though on the bronze sheen of these frail wings, in the white generally farther east” (6). Marlow’s tale of Jim follows Jim’s interrupted journey farther east disorderedly but seamlessly. His webbed portrait of Jim is a composite of loosely integrated and interlaced impressions.
tracings, in the gorgeous markings, he could see other things” (158).\footnote{For a more thorough discussions of Marlow’s affectionate and sexually charged portrait of Jim see McCracken 17-38. For McCracken “the relationship of Marlow and Jim produces some of Conrad’s most beautiful writing” (27). In “Joseph Conrad and the Ghost of Oscar Wilde,” Ruppel argues that Conrad walks a “tightrope in his exploration of the homosocial continuum—pushing out the boundaries a little and then pulling back to accommodate a conventional audience that would have been hostile to a more overt exploration” (19).} Stein’s knowledge of Lepidoptery informs his vision of the markings and tracings in a butterfly’s desiccated wing. Stein is interested in the formal qualities of the butterfly’s wing, qualities which contain information and other possible vistas and images. But this wing is, obviously rarefied, separate from its living wingedness.

Stein collects, classifies and stores specimens almost as if he were a \textit{naturalist} novelist. In \textit{The Experimental Novel} (1880), Émile Zola maintained that the ideal novelist is half observer, half experimenter: “nous voyons également que le romancier est fait d’un observateur et d’un expérimentateur” ‘we also see that the novelist is made up of the observer and the experimenter’ (7; my translation). Zola’s novelist is an empiricist, his work a compilation of facts observed in nature: “En somme, toute l’opération consiste à prendre les faits dans la nature, puis à étudier le mécanisme des faits, en agissant sur eux par les modifications des circonstances et des milieux, sans jamais s’écarter des lois de la nature” ‘In sum, the entire operation consists in gathering the facts of nature, and then studying the mechanisms of these facts, and acting on them by means of changing the circumstances and the milieux, without ever loosing hold of the facts of nature’ (8; my translation). Stein spends his days at his desk, “classing and arranging specimens, corresponding with entomologists in Europe, writing up a descriptive catalogue of his treasures” (158). The verbs “corresponding,” “writing-up,” and “descriptive” put us in
mind of the act of writing. Repeated references to paper, ink and penmanship in this
passage evoke the practice of writing:

> Wooden tablets were hung above at irregular intervals. The light reached one of
> them, and the word Coleoptera written in gold letters glittered mysteriously
> upon a vast dimness. The glass cases containing the collection of butterflies were
> ranged in three long rows upon slender-legged little tables. One of these cases
> had been removed from its place and stood on the desk, which was bestrewn
> with oblong slips of paper blackened with minute handwriting (156).

This special case, labeled with gold letters, contains the rare, yellow specimen. But it is
Stein’s classificatory impulse that Marlow’s narrative style is opposed to. Marlow finds
Stein’s verdicts and his lepidoptery constricting, limiting, even *deadly*. Stein’s shelves of
boxes he calls “catacombs of beetles”—their content still and moribund. Marlow narrates
to give events meaning, but not to fix their meaning. Rather than labeling Jim “a
Romantic,” as Stein does, Marlow reimagines him in every successive retelling. He calls
him “one of us,” but never says who this “us” is. 33

Fluttering yellow butterflies feature prominently in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One
Hundred Years of Solitude*. These butterflies are not rare and elusive but common. As in
Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, when desiccated and anatomized, they are deathly, when alive and
unfixed, regenerative.

> Butterflies first appear in Pietro Crespi’s love letters to Rebecca. Crespi was the
> “most handsome” and “well-mannered” man who had ever been seen in Macondo. Like

33 Conrad’s ambiguous use of the pronoun “us” here reminds me of Simone de Beauvoir’s articulation of the
paradox of humanity’s condition in her 1947 book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The privilege of thought which
man alone possesses, “of being a sovereign and unique object subject amidst a universe of objects,” argues de
Beauvoir, “is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an
individual in the collectivity on which he depends” (7).
Stein’s “graves of butterflies” mentioned above, his letters to the Buendía girls contain desiccated specimens. Hidden in Rebecca’s room, tied in pink ribbon, Úrsula finds Crespi’s love tokens: “dieciséis cartas perfumadas y los esqueletos de hojas y pétalos conservados en libros antiguos y las mariposas disecadas que al tocarlas se convirtieron en polvo” ‘tied together with pink ribbons, the sixteen perfumed letters and the skeletons of leaves and petals preserved in old books and the dried butterflies that turned to powder at the touch’ (29; 38). Crespi’s butterflies are associated with a language which is “conserved” in old books but is absent from everyday vernacular practices and modes of expression. They are not the result of experiential knowledge and manipulation, but obsolete emblems of love and affection. Unsurprisingly, the second Úrsula touches them, they crumble into dust.

In Chapter 6, after Rebecca marries José Arcadio, Crespi sends dried-up butterflies to Amaranta instead (see Figure 3). The narrator reports that Crespi, rather than tending to his shop, spends his afternoons “escribiendo esquelas desatinadas, que hacía llegar a Amaranta con membranas de pétalos y mariposas disecadas, y que ella devolvía sin abrir” ‘writing wild [misguided] notes, which he would send to Amaranta with flower petals and dried butterflies, and which she would return unopened.’(136; 174). Crespi’s letters, and the dried-up butterflies that accompany them, speak of obsolescence and ossification. His letters remain unopened, unread.

Crespi is sent to Macondo by the Indies Company in order to repair a broken pianola that the Company had also sent (along with an array of Viennese furniture and Dutch tablecloths) a few months before. “La casa importadora envió por su cuenta un experto italiana, Pietro Crespi, para que armara y afinara la pianola, instruyera a los

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34 Translations of One Hundred Years of Solitude are taken from Edith Grossman’s 1970 English translation of the novel.
compradores en su manejo y las enseñara a bailar la música de moda impresa en seis rollos de papel” “The import house sent along at its own expense an Italian expert, Pietro Crespi, to assemble and tune the pianola, to instruct the purchasers in its functioning, and to teach them how to dance the latest music printed on its six paper rolls’ (27; 35).

Crespi teaches the Buendía family how to dance by resorting to his company’s pointlessly instructive manual printed in six paper rolls.35 He is an “expert,” but his expertise is an “importation” rather than a byproduct of local knowledge and experience.

The third time butterflies appear in the novel, they come with Mr. Herbert, a North American entrepreneur. Mr. Herbert is an amateur lepidopterist and the man charged with setting up a banana plantation in Macondo. He appraises Macondo’s land and air with a naturalist’s eye—an appreciation which is inseparable from his “hunting” of butterflies. “En los días siguientes se le vio con una malla y una canastilla cazando mariposas en los alrededores del pueblo. El miércoles llegó un grupo de ingenieros, agrónomos, hidrólogos, topógrafos y a grimensores que durante varias semanas exploraron los mismos lugares donde Mr. Herbert cazaba mariposas” ‘On Wednesday a group of engineers, agronomists, hydrologists, topographers, and surveyors arrived who for several weeks explored the places where Mr. Herbert had hunted his butterflies’ (273; 113).

Macondo’s citizens see through Mr. Herbert’s naturalist façade and see him, Mr. Brown, and his “fluttering” entourage as something else: an omen of war and death.

35 I am not asserting that, for example, Australian or Viennese musical folkways were not formative of Latin American popular musical culture, just think of the tuba and the accordion in Mexican music and its South American reiterations. The prominence of the accordion is directly due to the Austrian occupation of Mexico in the mid-19th century. However, the accordion is a central feature of Colombian folklore, and modes of transmitting and telling stories. It is, not surprisingly, a prominent feature in the works of García Márquez. I am simply saying that a six-page manual instructing people how to dance, when they already know how to, is not precisely instructive.
Más tarde llegó el señor Jack Brown en un vagón suplementario que engancharon en la cola del tren amarillo, y que era todo laminado de plata, con poltronas de terciopelo episcopal y techo de vidrios azules. En el vagón especial llegaron también, revoloteando en torno al señor Brown, los solemnes abogados vestidos de negro que en otra época siguieron por todas partes al coronel Aureliano Buendía, y esto hizo pensar a la gente que y esto hizo pensar a la gente que los agrónomos, hidrólogos, topógrafos y agrimensores, así como mister Herbert con sus globos cautivos y sus mariposas de colores, y el señor Brown con su mausoleo rodante y sus feroces perros alemanes, tenían algo que ver con la guerra. (94)

Later on Mr. Jack Brown arrived in an extra coach that had been coupled onto the yellow train and that was silver-plated all over, with seats of episcopal velvet, and a roof of blue glass. Also arriving on the special car, fluttering around Mr. Brown, were the solemn lawyers dressed in black who in different times had followed Colonel Aureliano Buendía everywhere, and that led the people to think that the agronomists, hydrologists, topographers, and surveyors, like Mr. Herbert with his captive balloons and his colored butterflies and Mr. Brown with his mausoleum on wheels and his ferocious German shepherd dogs, had something to do with the war.’ (113)

Ultimately, they are proven right. The interventions of the United Fruit caravan into local life are decisive, disruptive and ultimately fatal.

The final appearance of butterflies in One Hundred Years of Solitude is the most dramatic. Clouds of yellow butterflies follow the young enamored Mauricio Babilonia wherever he goes. From the time Meme Buendía meets Babilonia, her nights become unsettled with her memories of him and of his fluttering butterflies. Babilonia’s love for Meme is puzzling and lively, unlike the hoary love of Crespi. It manifests itself as a particularly local affair, which unfolds under the tutelage of a foreign power, much like the novel itself.

Babilonia is associated with Mr. Herbert and his Banana company. But rather than a North American would-be rentier, he is the company mechanic: “Había nacido y
crecido en Macondo, y era aprendiz de mecánico en los talleres de la compañía bananera” ‘He had been born and raised in Macondo, and he was an apprentice mechanic in the banana company garage’ (117; 140). Meme’s mother, the “cachaca” Fernanda, disapproves of Babilonia and his line of work:

A Fernanda, sin embargo, le bastó el verlo una vez para intuir su condición de menestral. Se dio cuenta de que llevaba puesta su única muda de los domingos, y que debajo de la camisa tenía la piel carcomida por la sarna de la compañía bananera. No le permitió hablar. No le permitió siquiera pasar de la puerta que un momento después tuvo que cerrar porque la casa estaba llena de mariposas amarillas (117).

Fernanda, however, needed only one look to guess his status of mechanic. She saw that he was wearing his one Sunday suit and that underneath his shirt he bore the rash of the banana company. She would not let him speak. She would not even let him come through the door, which a moment later she had to close because the house was filled with yellow butterflies (140).

Babilonia is not “allowed to speak”; his words are considered too base to be worthy of Meme’s mother’s attention. The kaleidoscope of butterflies that follow him speak for him.

Babilonia has no sophisticated instruments, but he has the practical knowledge of a man who works with his hands. He teaches Meme to drive not by resorting to series of undecipherable manuals and explanations but through practical demonstrations: “Al contrario del chofer titular, Mauricio Babilonia le hizo una demostración práctica” ‘Unlike the regular chauffeur, Mauricio Babilonia gave her a practical lesson’ (117; 140; my emphasis). It should come as no surprise that the clouds of butterflies that shadow him are themselves shrouded in the magic peculiar to stories. The romanced realist style of One Hundred Years of Solitude emerges throughout, in just this way, from the practical manipulation of available matter.

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Meme soon learns that where the butterflies are—at the movie house, at concerts, at High Mass—Babilonia will be. Meme’s mother Fernanda does not see the symbolic power, let alone the magic, in this train of butterflies. The moment she gets wind of her daughter’s love affair, she contacts the town’s mayor and complains about a chicken thief who supposedly trespasses on her property every night. That same night, as Mauricio Babilonia climbs the wall to Meme’s bedroom, he is shot by a town officer, and paralyzed for life.36

After hearing the fatal shot ring out late at night, Meme becomes mute forever, and in another sense also blind—she never sees Macondo as a place of enchantment again. When dispatched by her mother to the capital, she is in a state of somnambulance, and does not notice the yellow butterflies that still flutter about her:

Meme apenas se dio cuenta del viaje a través de la antigua región encantada. No vio las umbrosas e interminables plantaciones de banano a ambos lados de las líneas. No vio las casas blancas de los gringos, ni sus jardines aridecidos por el polvo y el calor, ni las mujeres con pantalones cortos y camisas de rayas azules que jugaban barajas en los pórticos. (121)

Meme barely took notice of the journey through the formerly enchanted region. She did not see the shady, endless banana groves on both sides of the tracks. She did not see the white houses of the gringos or their gardens, dried out by dust and heat, or the women in shorts and blue-striped shirts playing cards on the terraces. (144)

From a magical vision of butterflies and overwhelming love, we are left with a vista of local destitution and material want, which remains unseen by Meme.

36 Robert Stevens and Roland Vela have taken this butterfly episode as an instance of the elision in García Márquez’s style of figurative and literal language and an effacement of the usual distinction between magical and real. While their reading is plausible, a more nuanced way of conceiving of this elision, would take note of the technical language spliced with a naïve naturalistic register, which is also vernacular.
Through their yellow butterflies Conrad and García Márquez reveal how certain emerging secular forces of productivity, of which the novel is one, distort stories and storytelling practices, and inflect our perception of the real. Conrad’s yellow butterfly is an image of his novel’s subject: Jim. Unlike Stein, Marlow does not seek to fix, classify and identify Jim or the butterfly that is his foil. Instead, he provides an unsettling and composite portrait of Jim that is multi-perspectival, anecdotal, shifting and non-linear, unpinned-down. Marlow’s storyteller-portrait of Jim’s “individuality” complicates canonical novelistic notions of interiority and homelessness. García Márquez, in turn, multiplies and baffles Conrad’s lone yellow butterfly. The kaleidoscope of yellow butterflies in One Hundred Years of Solitude is an image not only of García Márquez’s deployment of stories to create a polyphonic view of the real, but also of the self-generating qualities of those stories which thrive without being authored or authorized. Babilonia’s butterflies are also an image of a particular form of loving which is vernacular and intimate and resists representation in any conventionalized way—but is ultimately, neutered, paralyzed.
Conclusion

Through the reclamation of stories and storytelling processes, Conrad and García Márquez allow for different depictions and understandings of what constitutes the real. Their works root us in an alternative reality by training us in illusion and the counterpart of illusion—physical craft. These two authors are engaged in a redemption of the real which is physical and experienced—even if also digressive, recurrent and unpredictable. Through stories and romance tactics, these two authors generate written meaning that is not preemptive and singular but productive and social, grounded in vernacular practices and forms of speech. This technique also allows them to question ideologies that mystify, not by exposing or denouncing them, but by revealing the distance between official, definitive pronouncements and the operations of indefinite, furtive processes.

That Babilonia and Jim are unable to tell their own tales is a subtle reminder of García Márquez’s and Conrad’s skeptical attitude towards their own remedial use of stories—of their ultimate complicity in the institutionalization of narrative possibility. Their stories of stories remain fixed in their novelized forms, at the mercy of patterns of circulation, consumption and dissemination dictated by the global literary market.
Chapter 1. Theoretical Underpinnings

*Storytelling and Worldly Wonders*

The works of Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez are groundbreaking in their realistic, experiential exploration of the matrices of the world. But they are also exceptional in their depiction of the unusual and the unexpected, the marvelous. Their fabulous-realist literary universes are steeped in paradox—wondrous yet factual; mythical yet technical; estranged yet intensely social. How should we reconcile their commitment to verisimilitude with their commitment to embellishment and extravagant storytelling?

This dissertation will explore the relationship between story and wonder, craft and the real in the works of Conrad and García Márquez. It will argue that making is a precondition for seeing and telling. The amalgam of seeing, telling and making establishes the conditions required for the active creation and transmission of stories and for the development and consolidation of storytelling practices and rituals. Craft, which is learned by practice, is a harbinger of experience, and experience is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for seeing and understanding the immediate, material world. In other words, craft is indicative of an ability to transform and manipulate raw matter. But our ability to tell stories about ourselves and our encounters with others is directly related to our ability to see what is marvelous, or unusual about ourselves and others. The marvels that Conrad and García Márquez narrate, I will show here, are the wonders the world reveals to the observant craftsman.

Technical experience—a pre-requisite of craft-making—is not the enemy of creative invention; on the contrary, it is its first mate. Skilled artisans make observations
of the material world with expertise and precision. Their vision, perhaps because trained and technical, is equipped to see and lead us to see what is unique and unusual in the world—what is wonderful about it. A “great storyteller,” claims Walter Benjamin, “will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen” (“The Storyteller” 47). A storyteller is inevitably bound to a community and its actual practices.

The seeing and understanding peculiar to craft and expressed in stories is not automatic, predetermined or substitutable. It is, instead, de-automated—the knowledge contained and conveyed by it is intimately tied to inventive and regenerative practices. Storytelling removes subjects and objects from theoretical and prescriptive accounts of what constitutes the real, granting subjects the capacity to see the world afresh, through a framework defined by an ability to make things out of the material nearest at hand. Stories uniquely allow people to express what is exceptional and unexpected about their communities without separating tellers and tales from these communities.37

This dissertation will also argue that our ability to tell and to see suffers when we cannot make. If we cannot do, we cannot see, if we cannot see, we cannot tell. Conrad and García Márquez, I will show here, are not only interested in the relation between making and seeing, seeing and telling, but also in what happens to our vision—to our ability to see and describe the immediate world and its materials—when we are not allowed to manipulate, or to know this material. Both authors dramatize the mystifications and blind spots that emerge when communal making practices are interrupted, displaced or deformed.38

37 “The serious literary artists who write stories in prose,” argues Northrop Frye, “also tell us something about the life of their times, and about human nature as it appears in that context” (41). In the lower (more commercial) romance genre, continues Frye, “the story is told primarily for the sake of the story.”

38 In Ways of Seeing (1972) the art critic John Berger explores the relation between the “deprivation” of vision and historical mystification. “When we are prevented from seeing [the past],” he argues, “we are being
Conrad and García Márquez are pragmatists, but they are also fabulists. They allow for extravagance but only if that extravagance is bound to the autochthonous. They are, in this regard, romancers of the real. Throughout this dissertation I will use the umbrella term “romances of reality” to clarify how and why the works of these two authors depart from the works of more traditional writers of novels and romances. I will also use this category to find common ground between two authors separated by time, language and style. Eventually, I will compare their distinct handlings of this theoretical category. Seeing how they use stories to describe the real wonderfully will help to situate these two authors at the beginning and at the end of the continuum of literary modernism.

What I have described here is, to an extent, a problem of novelistic form. It makes sense that the realism of Defoe, Austen, Eliot, Flaubert et al is formally insufficient to capture a reality that is multiple, intermediate and ambiguous—different in form and content from the “reality” that realism is formally and structurally equipped to capture. By adopting and adapting the techniques of the storyteller, Conrad and García Márquez transcend and transfigure the traditional form of the realist novel and call into question its ability to depict the real lives of distant and unfamiliar people,

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39 The “prestige of ‘realism’ in the nineteenth-century” argues Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture*, “reflected the prevailing fashions of that culture, nearly all of which emphasized some form of correspondence, the paralleling of mental structures with something in the outer world” (32; my emphasis).
places and customs. They question “realism’s” horizontal idea of action, its use of rhetoric to create an illusion of “logic and causality” (Frye 34). The “realist, with his sense of logical and horizontal continuity,” argues Northrop Frye in The Secular Scripture, “leads us to the end of his story” (35). The “romancer,” on the other hand, “scrambling over a series of disconnected episodes, seems to be trying to get us to the top of it.” Certain particularities to the genre of romance, aside from its friendliness to stories, make it oddly suitable for describing the strange and unfamiliar ways of the peripheral worlds and peoples these two authors represent. In particular I want to rescue romance’s aversion to telos, the arch manner in which it delays the denouement typical of the epic and the novel, and its ahistorical conception of time.

It is also important to emphasize that these authors are more than just romancers in the style of Ariosto. There is something about their work which resists the established formulas of the traditional romance, such as isolation, exoticization, idealization and restoration. Their works seek to put in words the visible wonders revealed to experienced practitioners of autochthonous crafts and practices, rather than enchant or amuse readers with illusions and apparitions.

Through the studied representation of local craft and practices, and the stories and languages associated with these practices, Conrad and García Márquez offer an unexpected picture of a strange, yet pragmatic reality. They seek to transmit knowledge grounded in experience, and they deliver this knowledge using the formal tactics and methods developed and used by tales and taletellers. In this way, their works imagine

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40 Romance, argues Frye, is parodic and demonic. It represents “action on two levels, neither of them corresponding very closely to the ordinary world of experience” (34). This principle of “action on two levels” shows us that “romance presents a vertical perspective which realism, left to itself, would find it very difficult to achieve.” For Frye, Romance is not only vertical, it is also cyclical. “Most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of descent into a night world and a return to the idyllic world” (39).
problems that cannot be solved by homelessness, conquest or proselytization, the solutions traditionally offered by the epic and the novel.41

By focusing on the collision and not on the incompatibility of the two modes of romance—as in reincorporated stories—and reality, this dissertation will attempt to understand when and why romance requires realism and realism, romance.42 It will suggest that by making the two modes struggle against each other, these authors capture, for want of a better phrase, the variegations of the world. By attending to cases where reality and romance meet head-on, this dissertation will also compare Gabriel García Márquez’s and Joseph Conrad’s distinctive approaches to the portrayal of truth, or the real, in fiction.43

41 See note 3.

42 In the past decades, literary critics have sought to determine whether romance is or is not a genre. Fredric Jameson argues that romance is more a “generalized existential experience” that ranges from the “impressionistic to the phenomenologically rigorous,” rather than a clearly definable category (“Magical Narratives” 139). Like Frye, Jameson considers romance to be more a “mode” than a “genre”—an aesthetic with which to resolve the irresolvable magically through folk tales. For Frye, romance results from a process of wish fulfillment: “the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality” (193). Barbara Fuchs also notes the category’s notorious slipperiness, arguing that it is “a more general type of literary production”—a “strategy,” not a genre (Fuchs 5). Patricia Parker also observes the dilation and error that characterize prose romance (Parker 15).

43 Critical studies discussing the malleability of romance—its tendency to infect other genres—abound. Jameson suggests that romance, because of its power to “turn our attention to those elements in the ordinary world which must be transformed,” is by definition an ideal vehicle for literary innovation (“Magical Narratives” 138). In “Modernism and the Persistence of Romance,” Katie Owens-Murphy argues that modernist writers like Willa Cather and Katherine Anne Porter redeployed romance in their realist novels “by manipulating, challenging and revising its traditional generic conventions” (48). However, the extent to which Conrad and García Márquez use romance and storytelling tactics to challenge the conventions of realism remains largely unstudied. So does Conrad and García Márquez’s linguistic and geographic marginality, as it relates to their particular rendition of romance and stories.
To See and to Hear

After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it.

-Victor Shklovsky

Storytelling removes subjects and objects from “the automatism of perception,” to borrow Viktor Shklovsky’s terminology (3). If I can tell a certain kind of story, I can see what is exceptional about my cultural milieu. I can make the familiar seem strange again. Goethe’s epigrammatic definition of the nouvelle also alludes to stories’ peculiar capacity to give credence to the exceptional. A nouvelle, argues Goethe, is the relating of an event that is unheard of—that is, the integration of the unusual into the narrative fabric of stories (“eine sich ereignete, unerhörte”) (203). If we join Shklovsky’s and Goethe’s definitions of the story, we arrive at a sort of unified formula for storytelling: if we can see and hear what is unusual, we can recount and retell it, understand and appreciate it. Stories are an effective antidote to automatic, stale, limited and limiting, fixed and fixing accounts of the world.

In the preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897), Conrad draws on this formula (to make is to see, to make and to see is to tell) to lay out his artistic intent: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you see” (5). In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 1982, García Márquez inverts this formula to riff on Latin America’s “unknowability.” Because Europeans lack an interpretive framework for seeing Latin America’s reality, Latin America remains unseen. A certain blindness interrupts the vision of insiders and outsiders alike. “La interpretación de nuestra realidad con esquemas ajenos sólo contribuye a hacernos cada vez más desconocidos, cada vez menos
libres, cada vez más solitarios” “The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknowable, ever less free, ever more solitary’ (89; online). Consequently, the complex story of Latin America remains untold and by extension unheard: “la violencia y el dolor desmesurados de nuestra historia” ‘the immeasurable violence and pain of our history,’ asserts García Márquez, ‘son el resultado de injusticias seculares y amarguras sin cuento’ “are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness” (90; online; my emphasis). If Latin America’s uniqueness became legible to outsiders as a distinctive reality rather than as a curious eccentricity or a catastrophic mixture of incompetence and criminality, then its solitude, its remoteness, might begin to recede. “Pero creo que los europeos de espíritu clarificador, los que luchan también aquí por una patria grande más humana y más justa, podrían ayudarnos mejor si revisaran a fondo su manera de vernos.” ‘But I do believe that those clear-sighted Europeans who struggle, here as well, for a more just and humane homeland, could help us far better if they reconsidered their way of seeing us’ (89; online; my emphasis). The irony of the “clear-sighted” European imagined by García Márquez here is that his clarity of vision (and thought) also makes him blind (and dumb).

The term “wonderful” in this dissertation is not synonymous with the supernatural or the impossible, but describes what becomes perceptible through the practice of craft—the technical ability to shape raw, earthly material. The wonderful is something that becomes visible through stories. It reveals itself to those who have

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44 Jorge Luis Borges, himself a journeyman in the land of the fantastic, was struck by Conrad’s keen articulation of the magical within the real. For Conrad, the wonderful is ingrained in the real rather than extraneous to it: “I remember a very deep remark of Joseph Conrad—he is one of my favorite authors—I think it is in the foreword to something like The Dark Line,” said Borges in an interview with The Paris Review (163). According to Borges, Conrad thought that, “when one wrote, even in a realistic way, about the world, one was writing a fantastic story because the world itself is fantastic and unfathomable and mysterious.” Borges re-translates (or misremembers) the title of Conrad’s story, which is The Shadow Line.
preserved, reacquired or readapted their storytelling mechanisms and abilities, which goes hand in hand with the preservation and adaptation of craft, as in steering a boat through a difficult river shoal or weaving a sheep wool shawl.

It is only after Marlow has proven his virtuosity as a seer and listener, as a storyteller, that he allows himself to see and describe wonders in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The immense distance between the ideas of the Belgian empire and its actual practices makes the whole enterprise deaf and dumb—unspeakable, unseeable: “I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn’t talk and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? I could see a little ivory coming out from there, and I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there...Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it” (23). It is Marlow’s sailorly awareness of the Congo River’s materiality—its muddiness, its rankness, its flow—that creates visible wonders in *Heart of Darkness*. “The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver—over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a somber gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly without a murmur” (23). What is impressive here is the perceptible, natural world, which supersedes the faux majesty of any temple. The blinding beauty of this landscape is the consequence of Marlow’s sailorly perspective and practice. He can describe this scene in such a way because of his knowledge of and interest in the river’s surface and flow—prerequisite skills for the practice of his craft.

García Márquez’s short story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” (1968) tells the tale of an old, winged man’s sudden arrival in a small Caribbean town. In this story, as in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, relatability and visibility, craft and matter, are intertwined. The alien castaway creature in García Márquez’s story becomes
comprehensible to the local villagers after prolonged inspection. After watching it intently, Pelayo and Elisenda, a local couple, conclude that this apparition, although fantastic, is, in fact, very much familiar. “Tanto lo observaron, y con tanta atención, que Pelayo y Elisenda se sobrepusieron muy pronto del asombro y acabaron por encontrarlo familiar.” “They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar’ (240; 223). The winged man is manifestly otherworldly (he has wings!) but in point of fact he is of this world, his wings daubed in the earthliest of earthy matter—mud: “Sus alas de gallinazo grande, sucias y medio desplumadas, estaban encalladas para siempre en el lodazal” ‘His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud.’ When they finally address it, the creature replies to them in an “en un dialecto incomprensible pero con una buena voz de navegante. Fue así como pasaron por alto el inconveniente de las alas, y concluyeron con muy buen juicio que era un náufrago solitario de alguna nave extranjera abatida por el temporal” ‘incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor’s voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm’ (245; 224). The creature becomes even more knowable the moment a trade is assigned to it—not any trade, but one obviously borrowed from the annals of stories and storytellers, “un náufrago solitario de alguna nave extranjera” ‘a lonely castaway from some foreign ship.’

Conrad and García Márquez’s attunement to what is unusual, or out of place, about their worlds forms the basis for their shared proclivity for seeing and hearing the

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45 Translations of García Márquez’s stories are taken from Collected Stories, a compilation of García Márquez’s short works translated by Gregory Rabassa and J.S. Bernstein, first published in 1984.
stories created and transmitted by those experiencing these worlds. In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966) Mary Douglass argues that dirt is “matter out of place”—that which “must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained” (41). Dirt “is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (36). However, in *Heart of Darkness* and in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”—mud becomes an ensign of unsystematized visibility and narrative integration rather than of systematic exclusion and silencing obfuscation.

Conrad and Garcia Márquez’s mud is an ambiguous symbol. The muddy is not something that is already either sacred or profane, but something that is observed and understood gradually as it is observed. Their anomalous deployment of mud in these two works is almost ritualistic, it allows them to “enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence” (35). Rather than excluding the muddied from the realm of the knowable and the schematic, they integrate it into a knowable social structure—without, at the same time, discarding its strangeness. Through stories, storytellers and the knowledge gained in the practice of craft, the ambiguous, or the unknown becomes familiar, *narratable*. Stories, it emerges, are threads that bind communities together. A community that is denied the telling of its stories is a community in crisis—disintegrated, unraveled, unseen.
**Storytelling Novelists**

Conrad and García Márquez appropriate and revivify the techniques and tactics of the oral storyteller. Their works emphasize the important role communities play in the transmission and creation of their own stories. They are interested in the dynamic and complex interaction between telling and acting, listening and reacting. They also dramatize the collision of storytelling worlds with non-storytelling worlds to draw some broad analogies—the modern vs. the pre-modern, the “primitive” vs. the civilized, the oral vs. the literate.

Their use of tales that operate simultaneously and in multiple registers makes their novels composite and non-linear, held together by repetition and retelling. They insist on the anecdotal origins of their novels, only to muddy these origins by adding layers of textual mediation and dramatic irony. The integration of stories and storytelling tactics into their written works allows them to repudiate normative, fixed accounts of what is knowable. Through stories, Conrad and García Márquez open up the possibility of a reality that is constantly being *reworked*—always open to transformation and reformulation.

“I think we ought to take seriously Conrad’s protest in the Note to *Lord Jim,*” writes Edward Said, “that Marlow’s narration *could* have been spoken during an evening of swapping yarns” (118). It is a “surprising line to take,” continues Said, “but Conrad was addressing what was to him always an important point, the dramatized telling of the story, how and when it was told, for which the evidence was an integral part of the novel as a whole.” The stories and novels of García Márquez and Conrad refuse to give definitive, closed answers to the question: what is reality? They respond to this question instead with the open-endedness and ambiguity characteristic of the oral tale.
The relation between novel-writing and storytelling in Conrad’s work has been a subject of recurrent critical interest. Conrad’s narratives, writes Paul Wake, “are structured around the transmission of story, and questioning the possibility of sustaining the distinction between that which is transmitted and the means of transmission” (x). Every one of Conrad’s “major novels,” writes Gorra, “began as a story, a story forced into length by Conrad’s need to explain” (548). The “dramatic protocol of much of Conrad’s fiction,” writes Edward Said, “is the swapped yarn, the historical report, the commonly exchanged legend, the musing recollection” (119). Conrad’s works, “in particular the Marlow texts,” writes Lech Harris, negotiate “the divide between an older, orally inflected storytelling and a modernist attention to technique” (242).

García Márquez’s novelistic use of stories and storytelling tactics has also been discussed by critics. In the “Politics of the Possible,” Kukum Sangari argues that García Márquez “digs beneath the rational incrustations of colonialism” to “uncover ways of storytelling that existed before or that have subcutaneously [sic] survived” (162). García Márquez’s self-consciously technically complex texts, argues Sangari, “gesture towards the autonomy of the story in its semantic aspect.” In García Márquez’s “marvelous realism,” stories:

exist above and beyond the storytellers who relate them, the language in which they are told, and the narrative structures in which they are held; stories are as protean as the people who tell and retell them, remember and forget them, repeat or improvise them. Stories are as malleable as human history. García Márquez’s fiction is not encumbered by the myth of the originality either of the author or of the narrative. Stories exist inside a continuous social space within which they can be remodeled and recombined. Little stories drop from long narratives to become full-fledged tales, or full-fledged tales are compressed into cameos and reinserted into long narratives. (165)
In “Tradición y renovación” Emir Rodríguez Monegal argues that García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* does not conceal its deep enmeshment in the tradition of oral storytelling—an enmeshment that leads not only to the recuperation but also to the renovation of stories and how they are told. García Márquez, continues Rodríguez Monegal, takes as his novel’s starting point “el cuento popular” ‘the popular tale.” He assembles his novel following structures that “reproducen (sin duplicar especularmente) la estructura del cuento popular” ‘reproduce (without mirroring) the structure of the popular tale’ (8; my translation). Armando Zubizarreta explores García Márquez’s use of tales and anecdotes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which he claims is composed of a series of anecdotes told and retold in non-linear ways as the novel advances. These stories shroud the novel’s historical impulses beneath the fantastic and the anecdotal. “Desde el inicio, el argumento histórico de la novela ha sido encabezado por una anécdota, y ha quedado envuelto en un tono anecdótico y fantástico” ‘Since its beginning, the novel’s historical plot has been headed up with an anecdote, and has wrapped everything up in an anecdotal and fantastic tone’ (94; my translation).

Along with the transmission of experience, an aura of inclusiveness and ambiguity, is, according to Walter Benjamin, characteristic of stories. “The most extraordinary things, marvelous things,” he writes, “are related [in stories] with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader.”

46 It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus

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46 In the seventh section of “The Storyteller,” Benjamin turns to Herodotus’s tale of Psammenitus to show how “stories thrive when left unexplained.” In Herodotus’s tale, Psammenitus doesn’t weep when his son is executed or when his daughter is taken captive, but he does “beat his forehead in grief at the sight of one of his former attendants” (Titan xi). Herodotus leaves the Pharaoh’s reaction unexplained. In “this lack of explanation,” argues Samuel Titan, “lies the reason why this story ‘does not use itself up’ the way information does but preserves its ‘germinative power.’”
the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (“The Storyteller” 213). It might seem that an aversion to facts and reliance on ambiguity makes stories unreliable barometers of the real. However, the ability of stories to impart truth, wisdom and experience, without having recourse to facts, reveals their particular capacity to depict the real in ways that resist preestablished and allegedly universal versions of it.

In *Lord Jim*, Marlow rejects facts as reliable auditors of human behavior. He mocks a jury’s attempt to understand Jim’s actions by adducing facts: “They wanted facts...Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!” (20). Marlow’s imaginative, impressionistic tale of Jim is more reliable than any mere accretion of facts could ever be, yet still, in characteristically Conradian manner, profoundly ambiguous. García Márquez’s attitude to measurable, quantifiable facts is just as irreverent, but in a different direction. Rather than rejecting fact, he turns it on its head, using it instead as an evocative fictional device reminiscent of reportage. García Márquez characteristically uses fact-like language to make the unbelievable believable.

47 Like Jim’s jury, the naturalist novelists of the 19th century tended to favor facts over fiction, at least according to the great polymath critic, George Steiner. This predilection for fact, argued Steiner, devitalized their novels, giving them “an atmosphere of restriction and inhumanity” (*Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* 43). The “naturalistic writers,” wrote Steiner, “haunted the research libraries, the museums, the lectures of archeologists and statisticians. ‘Give us Facts,’ they said with the Dickensian schoolmaster in Hard Times. Many of them were, literally, enemies of fiction.” Conrad was certainly not an “enemy of fiction,” despite his (almost naturalistic) predilection for technical competence and precision. The realities that offer themselves to Conrad have an element of the fantastic or fabulistic, despite being essentially realistic or at least eminently plausible. Conrad, like the authors Steiner discusses in *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959), came from a world “too formless and tragic for the instruments of European realism.” As Steiner recognized, “only two writers of fiction clearly glimpsed the impulses towards disintegration, the cracks in the wall of European stability [a stability which made European naturalist realism possible in the first place]: James in *The Princess Casamassima* and Conrad in *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent*” (33).

48 “If Conrad’s work is not a historical record of facts,” writes Chris GoGwilt, “it does stand in close proximity to the problem of recording such facts, and makes this especially relevant to future historians of colonialism” (137).
He suffuses his descriptions of the impossible with minute and exhaustive detail, and he relies on ciphers and details to validate what might otherwise be unverifiable.  

He described this narrative tactic in an interview with Peter Stone for the *Paris Review* in 1984: “If you say that there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants in the sky, people will probably believe you” (online). García Márquez uses the tricks of the reporter, detail and ostensible precision, to make plausible the implausible—a subversive and paradoxical, yet effective, maneuver, which recuperates and plays with the fictional elements of the factual.

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49 “Whether it is a true report or the semblance of one, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold,*” writes Gonzalo Díaz-Migoyo, “does not, despite factual coincidence, lose its fictitious unanswerable character. It is an account no less imaginary for being faithful to the facts and, conversely, no less historical for being the work of the imagination” (75).
The Self-Conscious Romance

Conrad and García Márquez deploy stories in an acutely self-conscious way. This, I will argue, makes their approach to stories and romance modern and ironic. Both authors scrutinize and contradict some of the basic assumptions of popular romances, such as unfettered freedom and individual wish fulfillment.

Conrad and García Márquez use the techniques and tactics of romance to explore reality rather than evade it. The tools of romance allow them to approach reality differently—in ways that have not yet become conventional, trite or obsolete. Romance and stories allow them to re-schematize and defamiliarize standardized notions of what constitutes reality, giving them another angle with which to approach it, to see it. We can understand their immersion in the practice of storytelling as a source of alternative knowledge about history and reality.

The process of retelling the world by reincorporating stories into our everyday accounts of it I equate with romance. To define romance as storytelling is not an obvious move, but it is, in this case, an eminently sensible one. Conrad and García Márquez use stories and storytelling processes to distance their work from the conventions of realism and the epic poem. Stories allow them to explore and implement quintessentially

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50 See note 1.

The tight relation between romance and stories is explored throughout Mimesis. The “courtly romance,” argues Auerbach, is not reality shaped and set forth by art, but an escape into fable and fairy tale.” If there is anything “earthbound” about romance, it is its closeness to stories: “it is this which makes all the colorful and vivid pictures of contemporary reality seem, as it were, to have sprung from the ground: the ground of legend and fairy tale, so that—as we said before—they are entirely without any basis in political reality” (132). Consider, for example, Auerbach’s paradigmatic romance, Yvain by Chrétien de Troyes. The passage Auerbach selects in dissecting this text is a reported tale—the story of Calogrenant’s attempt to find adventure.

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romance-like themes in their works, such as the pursuit of the unassimilable, the depiction of wonders and wanderings, the chase of the errant hero. Stories also allow them to implement romance-like tactics and techniques in their works, such as narrative digression and delay, non-causal connections, open-endedness and ambiguity. Conrad and García Márquez use stories and storytelling techniques to ironize grandiose epic stories of conquest, of progress toward a determined end, of sacralized founding or an inspired return to origins.

Despite Conrad’s and García Márquez’ reliance on the tropes of romance, their works transcend predictable popular romances and adventure stories. Unlike the perfectly isolated and idealistically inclined universe of the traditional romance, political and economic reality often interferes with and even ruptures the idealism of Conrad’s

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51 In The Anatomy of Criticism (1957) Frye argues that the naïve romance is “a fictional mode in which the chief characters live in a world of marvels” (367). In The Secular Scripture (1976), Frye argues that the “pattern in romance” is “the story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins” (46). The hero’s success derives mostly from his luck—a composite of internal qualities (i.e., “the merit of his courage”) and external ones (i.e., “unusual strength, noble blood, or a destiny prophesized by an oracle”).

52 In The Secular Scripture, Frye argues that the “hero of the romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended” (33). The “essential element of plot in romance,” he continues, is “adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form...At its most naïve it is an endless form in which a central character who never develops or ages goes through one adventure after another until the author himself collapses” (186). For Auerbach, the “world of knightly proving is also a world of adventure. It not only contains a practically uninterrupted series of adventures, more specifically, it contains nothing but the requisites of adventure” (136). The “wandering ship of Odysseus,” observes David Quint (following Borges and Frye), is the virtual emblem of romance: “a narrative which moves through a succession of virtually discrete and unconnected episodes. The ship often finds these episodes on islands that reinforce their self-enclosed nature” (34). Some of the distinguishing features of romance include, according to Allison Collins, “digression and errancy; interlaced episodes associated primarily through coincidence or accident; and a value of personal wish-fulfilment” (3).

53 Distinguishing features of epic include, according to Allison Collins, “a telos toward which the poem aims; unity of action moving towards that telos; and a value of public good over individual prowess or personal fulfilment” (318). “Romance episodes,” argues David Quint in Epic and Empire (1993), resist “fitting into the teleological scheme of epic” (15). “Virgilian Epic,” he maintains, “sees any deviance from the historical course of empire assuming the shape of romance narrative.”
and García Márquez’s characters. In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979), Ian Watt explores Conard’s use of romance tropes to explore reality in his works, particularly in *Almayer’s Folly*. “But in *Almayer’s Folly*, the genre [exotic romance] at least afforded Conrad an opportunity of developing one of his characteristic strengths as a writer, his power to describe the outside world” (44). Likewise, García Márquez’s fiction, although sometimes nearing the fantastic, is nevertheless fully appreciative of the real. In “García Márquez and the Novel,” Gene H. Bell Villada argues that García Márquez’s novels incorporate the unreal without becoming escapist: “Paradoxically the unreality in García Márquez, while intended for the delectation of readers who do in fact enjoy the wild invention for its own sake, actually has the hidden job of underscoring and enhancing the realities under depiction” (20).

In Mikhail Bakhtin’s account of adventuristic time (the chronotope of the Greek romance), “specificity” and “concreteness” are “necessarily very limited,” for any “concretization—geographic, economic, sociopolitical, quotidian—would fetter the freedom and flexibility of the adventures and limit the absolute power of chance” (100). But the literary universes of Conrad or García Márquez are not, in any absolute sense, abstract. There is something oppressive and frustrating about the worlds they describe. Furthermore, their interest in craft and its materiality fixes their work in the realm of the practical, the everyday, the technical, the real.

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54 In *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach observes early medieval romances’ distance from the realm of the practical and the experienced—the real. In the “scene of Calogrenant’s departure” in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain*, for example, “nothing is said about all the practical conditions and circumstances necessary to render the existence of such a castle possible and compatible with actual experience” (136). Such “idealization” argues Auerbach, “takes us very far from the imitation of reality.”
Conrad’s description of the process of storytelling in *Heart of Darkness* is instructive in its self-consciousness. I am referring specifically to the narrator’s portrayal of Marlow’s unique storytelling method: “The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze” (3). This famous passage is typically self-referential. It imagines storytelling as a process embedded in a series of frames and duplications. It uses symbols to imply that meaning is not concrete—a nut—but abstract—a mist. Marlow’s tales “endow” reality with an “internal glow”; they throw light on its more elusive elements. This passage is also a description à clef of Conrad’s own storytelling method—an instance of dramatic self-reference.

García Márquez’s approach to stories is also highly self-conscious. In *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961), stories are one of the few instruments for interpreting a reality that is, more often than not, confoundingly nonsensical. The colonel, for example, can only understand his lawyer’s bureaucratese by way of stories. “Es lo mismo desde hace quince años –replicó el coronel–. Esto empieza a parecerse al cuento del gallo capón” “It’s been that way for fifteen years,’ the colonel answered. ‘This is beginning to sound like the story about the capon.” (19; 25). The “cuento del gallo capón” is a playful story that never ends because it is never told. By means of distractions, digressions and other obfuscations, the teller of “el gallo capón” avoids telling the tale he’s supposed to tell. The story of “el gallo capón” is deceptive and self-referential. Although repetitive—

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55Translations of *No One Writes to the Colonel* are taken from J.S. Bernstein’s 1968 English translation of the novel.
“es lo mismo desde hace quince años”—it is not predictable. Its structure is stable yet unbounded, generative yet self-defeating.

The capon story is an ironic emblem of the art of the long digression. It reveals García Márquez’s keen awareness of the processes required to tell and to live in a world understood through stories, as well as the misunderstandings that take place when storytelling ways of living collapse and coincide with more rationalized understandings of the world. The story of the capon shares some of stories’ formal and structural elements, as well as some of stories’ stylistic and thematic conventions—but although a story, the capon caper is also something else. It is a story that draws on other stories to reveal a fundamental incongruity between what is expected and what actually occurs.

Conrad and García Márquez’s impulse to gather and display stories shrouds their work with a “collecting aesthetic”—a paradigmatically modernist posture.56 Their reports of stories can be interpreted as an early and late modernist response to the post-modernist problem of fragmentation—the abstraction of social life under capitalism. However, their use of stories to defy alienation and fragmentation is not the same. Conrad’s approach is nostalgic—he laments and mourns a storytelling world that is dying off as he writes it down. It is also conservative—it seeks to preserve something that he perceives might be in the process of disintegrating. García Márquez, on the other hand, is beyond nostalgia; he collects stories because they are the only thing worth collecting, because only by telling can we continue to live (a Scheherazade-like predicament).57 In

56 For a study of the collection as a modernist practice see Braddock. Conrad and García Márquez collect stories in their works to create dynamic and unsettling portraits of the world. They don’t merely sort, categorize, and preserve sorties.

57 “A modulation of the endless romance,” argues Frye in The Secular Scripture, “is the linking together of a series of stories by a frame providing a unified setting. The root of this in human life is, possibly, the child’s bedtime story: the Arabian Nights setting also preserves the sense of a threshold to a dream world” (110). For a more in-depth discussion of García Márquez involvement with the Arabian Nights, see Urbina.
the latter case, stories are prevalent and self-generating. The question is not how to preserve them, but how to hear them.

These two approaches to the abstraction and alienation that go hand in hand with modernity—in particular, the separation of man from his storytelling capacities—suggest early and late moments of literary modernism. Conrad’s foreboding nostalgia marks its inception and García Márquez’s amused resignation its culmination.
Realism Despite Itself

García Márquez’s and Conrad’s process of reincorporating and preserving stories I have equated with an impulse towards romance. Yet there is something vibrantly real about the dynamics required to make stories relevant—a pulsation which is lacking in more traditionally “realistic” modes of literary representation, and which both authors use to reinvent the conventions of narrating the real.

Conrad and García Márquez defy the abstraction of social life under capitalism by refusing to settle into the conventions of the realist novel—an 18th century European invention incompatible with what was delegated to the realm of the mythical and the preternatural by the European Enlightenment. In Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, George Steiner rehearses the main dilemmas of literary realism: its vastness and its uniformity, its reliance on reason and objectivity and its inability to accommodate the unknown in terms other than its own. The problem of realism (naturalism “being its most radical aspect”), argues Steiner, is “inseparable from the assumptions on which the central tradition of the European novel had been founded” (18).§8 Behind the European novel lay the forces of consolidated capitalism, generalized political enfranchisement, a confident bourgeois class, generalized legality and constitutionality. Forces which did not, and still do not, fully exist in the peripheral universes described by Conrad and García Márquez.

The grounds on which the realist novel stood were uniquely solid and comprehensive, but they were also defined and defining. According to Steiner, in “committing itself to a secular interpretation of life and to a realistic portrayal of

§8 “This tradition,” writes Steiner, “however, also had outliers (literary outsiders and innovators such as the American, Henry James; the Russians, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; and Conrad, the Pole)” (18).
ordinary experience, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction had predetermined its own limitations” (28). The “modern novel,” continues Steiner, broke with the “essential world view of the epic and of tragedy” and established a kingdom of its own: “the vast kingdom of human psychology perceived through reason and of human behavior in a social context” (19). The further we move from the kingdom’s center, observes Steiner, the more “the stuff of realism becomes tenuous.” Conrad and García Márquez seek to depict the indomitable and the unreasonable at the frontiers of the realist novel—things too formless to fit in any recognizable way in the mold of European realism. To illuminate alternative, nonsecular realities, these authors have no choice but to move beyond the dwindling language and formalities of the realist school. This transgression, in turn, exposes “the cracks in the wall of European stability”—the solid ground on which the novel grew and thrived (22).

There are other elements of the 19th-century novel that both Conrad and García Márquez reject. The novel’s preoccupation with and promotion of progress and character development, its integrative and proselytizing tendencies, its status as commodity, its reenactment of privacy and individuality, and its natural and astounding ability to subsume stories. By recuperating and dramatizing stories and storytelling in their works, these two authors attempt to capture a reality that is awesome. They turn to the conventions of tales and taletelling to liberate their fictional worlds from the circumscriptions of realism, in order to depict realities which are, indeed, fantastic: unhinged colonial delusions, displaced romantic sensibilities, voracious economic extraction, inestimable political, social and racial fragmentation.
The Experience of Craft

In *A Personal Record*, Conrad writes: “Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas, so simple that they must be as old as the hills” (15). The perdurance of simple, antique practices is, for Conrad, magic. “Hope,” he writes in his essay “Books,” “is the God-sent form of trust in the magic force and inspiration belonging to the life of this earth” (8). Simple ideas as “old as the hills” are the stuff that tradition is made of—expressions of the habitual and disinterested transmission of a certain type of knowledge or practice. I have argued that Conrad and García Márquez’s romanced deployment of sorties is idiosyncratically realistic. This “reality” results from a key affiliation, which I will establish here, between the exercise of craft and the art of storytelling. A link which goes hand in hand with another key couplet—namely, the one that unites craft and experience, and which is, as Conrad would say, as “old as the hills.”

“Tradition,” writes Arendt in her introduction to Benjamin’s *Illuminations* (1955), “transforms truth into wisdom, and wisdom is the consistence of transmissible truth” (xv). The same is true of stories, which immortalize human actions and give form to the world’s marvels and mysteries, bringing to light the rich and strange. “Woven into the fabric of real life,” writes Benjamin, “is wisdom” (“The Storyteller” 17). For Hannah Arendt, as for Walter Benjamin, experience is gained through the practice of making. Authentic experience, or meaning, is attained in practice and transmitted in person. It cannot be imparted or imposed from afar. The practice of craft, unlike the rote execution of mechanical processes, requires practical skill and communal involvement.

According to Benjamin, one of the many reasons why the office of storyteller suffers under modernity is that it has become disconnected from manual practices such
as weaving and spinning: “And hence a second reason the gift of storytelling is disappearing: people no longer weave or spin, make handicrafts or do woodwork while listening to stories” (“The Handkerchief” 28). Without craftsmanship, argues Benjamin, neither experience nor its exchange is possible. Writing, claims Nikolai Leskov, the putative subject of Benjamin’s 1936 essay, “The Storyteller,” “is to me no liberal art, but a craft [ein Hand-werk]” (36). Expert storytellers, it follows, are expert craftsmen, eloquent handymen. “That old coordination of the soul, the eye and the hand,” writes Benjamin, “is that of the artisan which we encounter wherever the art of storytelling is at home” (54). The storyteller is a practical man—his prerogative is to transform and manipulate matter, his purpose to produce a circulating something. “An orientation toward practical interests,” writes Benjamin, “is characteristic of many born storytellers” (29).

Workshops are propitious settings for the exchange and transmission of skills and knowledge, but also for the exchange and transmission of stories. If “peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling,” continues Benjamin, “the artisan class was its university” (28). In workshops people get together to practice craftsmanship; and while they work, they talk, and how they talk reflects the sort of work that they do. The skills required to make or steer an object using our hands or any other part of our body become the skills needed in composing and telling a story.

Benjamin draws a direct line between storytelling and other crafts—in particular, metalworking: “The mineral,” he writes, “is the lowest stratum of created things. For the

59 “Soul, eye, and hand,” says Benjamin, “are connected” with the words the storyteller utters. Through “their interaction” they “define a practice”—a practice which is “no longer familiar to us” (30).
storyteller, however, it is directly joined to the highest” (71). The importance of minerals in stories, continues Benjamin, is salient in the works of Leskov, who, according to Benjamin, “glorifies native craftsmanship through the silversmiths of Tula.” The teller of “The Alexandrite” (to whom Leskov “attributes his knowledge”) is “a gem engraver named Wenzel who has achieved the greatest conceivable skill in his art.” Wenzel’s technical proficiency and experiential knowledge, argues Benjamin, bring him closer to the divine. Because he is “the perfect artisan,” he has gained “access to the innermost chamber of the realm of created things.” Our ability to see the world is tied to an ability to work with its materials and to tell stories about our experience with the handling or mishandling of this material.

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60 There is a direct connection between the practice of metalmaking and the practice of writing—not just storytelling. Gutenberg was a successful innovator in the world of print largely because he was a practiced metalworker. Without metal alloys, neither typefounding nor hot metal typesetting would have been possible. The link between the craft of metalworking and of mechanically reproduced literature is one Benjamin conveniently ignores.
The Retreat and Return of Stories

For Benjamin, “the earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (“The Storyteller,” 30). The novel was born with the press; both its form and its content reflect its genesis—the “birthplace of the novel,” writes Walter Benjamin, “is the solitary individual” in “fully fledged capitalism” (53). In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Marlow famously claims, “We live as we dream—alone” (130). The novel, unlike the epic or the drama, claims George Steiner, “speaks to an individual reader in the anarchy of private life” (Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, 18). In a letter to H. D. Davray, Conrad writes, “La solitude me gagne: elle m’absorbe. Je ne vois rien, je ne lis rien. C’est comme une espèce de tombe, qui serait en même temps un enfer, où il fait écrire, écrire, écrire” ‘Solitude takes me over: it absorbs me. I don’t see anything; I don’t read anything. It’s like a sort of tomb, which is, at the same time, a sort of hell, in which the only thing that can be done is to write, write, write’ (The Collected Letters 3, 51; my translation).61

The novel’s desire to capture the fullness of human life, writes Walter Benjamin, “gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living” (“The Storyteller” 52). Its impulse to depict the course of entire lives is an indication precisely of its inability to comprehend life—which is, in all other respects, utterly fragmented. This holistic compulsion is an acknowledgement of the fact that the novel’s vision, and depiction of life, is abstracted, alienated. There is nothing Don Quixote (a sort of anti-novel) can actually seriously teach us—making it, in this sense and others, the quintessential

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61 Davray was a French translator and minor author. He first made personal contact with Conrad through H. G. Wells sometime between 1898 and 1900. Thereafter he became a zealous promoter of Conrad’s work.
predecessor of the realist romances of Conrad and García Márquez. For Benjamin, if a novel is in fact instructive, it is so in a false way (as in the Bildungsroman), or at the expense of its form (as in Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre). “If efforts were made,” writes Walter Benjamin, “now and again over the course of the centuries—most effectively perhaps in Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship—to instill instruction into the novel, these attempts always resulted in an alteration of the genre” (53). For Benjamin, instruction—as in the oral and experiential transmission of skill—belongs to the story, not the novel. The novel, read and written in an atmosphere of social isolation and economic alienation, cannot claim to be socially integrative or even technically instructive without simultaneously denying its particular origin and its concomitant form.62 Its depiction of life is, by necessity, directly opposed “to reality.”

Walter Benjamin linked the decline of stories to the decline of Erfahrung.63 Experience “that is passed down from one mouth to the next,” he argued, is the “source from which all storytellers have drawn” (49). The more “experience stock” falls in value, the more irrelevant becomes the “living presence” of the storyteller. Artisanry, argues

62 For Benjamin, the bildungsroman “does not deviate in the slightest from the novel’s fundamental structure.” Yet, “by integrating social processes into one person’s development, it bestows the most tenuous justification imaginable on the orders that govern those processes. The legitimization of those processes stands in direct opposition to reality” (54).

Benjamin was one of the first critics to point out the relationship between modern alienation and the rise of the novel, but he was followed by many others, Georg Lukács in particular. In The Theory of the Novel, Lukács argues that “the epic individual, the hero of the novel, is the product of estrangement from the outside world” (66). In The Historical Novel, he argues that “the naturalist development itself, particularly in its transition to lyrical subjectivism and impressionism, underlies the tendency to make history private” (199). For a more thorough discussion of Lukács and the theme of alienation see de Man 527–34, or the third note of this dissertation.

63 For a more thorough discussion of Benjamin’s sense of “Erfahrung” in contradistinction to “Erlebnis”—which means experience in the narrow sense of a lived experience, and lacks the communal element that Benjamin attributes to “Erfahrung”—see Staroselsky 51.
Benjamin nostalgically, is fading in the modern world, making humans “no longer familiar with this practice” and their stories empty and mundane: “The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste” (74). A similar phenomenon holds for the work of art. The “technique of reproduction,” wrote Benjamin in another renowned essay, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (221). Mechanical reproducibility lowers the value of an artwork’s “living presence”—its uniqueness, its aura.

The novel exists with a certain autonomy; it does not presuppose entire communities to remember and transmit it. It can magnify and disseminate with immense efficacy the voice of a singular tradition. It is prodigiously cannibalistic, able to integrate all sorts of things into itself. But this cannibalism also endows the novel with a proselytizing impulse—a capacity to assimilate difference indiscriminately.

Conrad was distinctively aware of the distance between the social and communal manner of the storyteller and the isolated and alienated manner of the novelist. Edward Said makes this point in his essay “The Presentation of Narrative” (1974), which seeks to understand Conrad’s “duplicitous use” of language as something that broadens the distance between words and their referents, that destabilize language in order to reilluminate. According to Said, “Conrad's personal history made him acutely sensitive to the different status of information in the sea life, on the one hand, and in the writing life on the other. In the former, community and usefulness are essential to the enterprise; in the latter the opposite is true” (119). Thus, continues Said, “Conrad had the dubious privilege of witnessing within his own double life the change from storytelling as useful,

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64 In The Dialogic Imagination (1975), Bakhtin considers the novel essentially parodic and ironic, able to mime official and authoritative discourses in unofficial, dialogic ways.
communal art to novel-writing as essentialized, solitary art.” García Márquez’s works also contrast the written and the oral through the novelistic, or writerly, dramatization of dynamic and ritualistic processes of storytelling.
Before Benjamin, Max Weber linked the decline of craft to the decline of ritual in “Science as Vocation.” For Weber, the “process of intellectual rationalization,” attributable to “modern advances in knowledge and technology,” separates humans from the work of their hands (17). Increased rationalization does not mean increased knowledge of the world, but rather “the knowledge, or belief, that we could find out if we wanted to.” The “savage,” argued Weber, “knows incomparably more about his tools.” “Increased rationalization” means that, in principle, there are “no mysterious incalculable forces intervening in our lives, but instead all things, in theory, can be mastered through calculation.” The modern human relies on technology and calculation to control and understand the world, stripping it of its magic and mystery. The rationalization and intellectualization of the times makes for the disenchantment of the world.

Weber articulates a version of the relationship Benjamin establishes between working and telling, experiencing and authenticity. Yet he does so without any of Benjamin’s nostalgia or his romantic glorification of the past. In fact, Weber rejects Romantic attempts to reenchant the world by glorifying its irrationalities, suggesting instead that the way to reenchant it is through polyphony, and the way to achieve polyphony is to allow people to pursue and practice their vocation without manipulation, coercion or extreme mediation.

Worthwhile ideas, argues Weber, are more likely to grow “from the soil of hard work” (12). A “real personality,” he continues, “is nothing other than a capacity to
experience life authentically.” And “the only way to have a “personality” is to be “entirely devoted” to your work. “Inner devotion” to her task raises the artist “up to the heights and dignity of the matter at hand.”

Authentic experience, and meaning, is gained in practice and transmitted in person, rather than imparted or imposed from afar. To look for experience in the realm of the irrational or the religious is not the way out of disenchantment. It is merely a “modern intellectual Romanticism of the irrational” (23). Inner devotion to the task at hand poses a greater challenge to monotheistic rationalism. It defies the acquisition and the imposition of fixed and universal value systems. If science can do anything, argues Weber, “it is precisely to uproot and destroy the belief that the world has any such thing as ‘meaning’” (22). If “your starting point is experience,” then “you will end up with

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65 Throughout his career Weber sought to understand the relation between the development of individual experience and modernity. According to Steven Seidman and Michael Grube, while “Weber saw that the modern world provided an ideal milieu within which individual autonomy could and did arise, he equally recognized that the peculiar combination of universal structures (economy, polity, law, science, bureaucracy) crystallized into a world in which submission and adaptation progressively replaced self-determination as the paradigmatic form of conduct” (498-508).

66 In her memoir, Fierce Attachments (1987), Vivian Gornick offers an example of the sort of knowledge that is passed on from one human to another. This knowledge differs from knowledge acquired through other channels. “Where had he learned to dance like that, we wondered. This was not the kind of dancing you learned from watching Astaire on Saturday afternoons in a darkened movie mirror. This dancing you got from people. But where? who? when? Did Maddy have a life somewhere else? The question was asked, but no one could wait for, much less pursue, an answer” (74).

67 “The grand rationalism of a way of life based on a systematic code of ethics, which flows from every religious prophecy,” argues Weber, “dethroned this polytheism in favor of the ‘one thing needful’” (31).

68 In Against Method (1975), the cultural critic Paul Feyerabend articulates another version of Weber’s optimistic view of science as a potential fount of diversity rather than monotony. In fact, for Feyerabend, a careful observation of the methods used by science through time reveal a lack of systematic or even consistent methodology. Knowledge, he writes, “is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges towards an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever-increasing ocean of mutually incompatible alternatives, each single theory, each fairy-tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing the others into grater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of consciousness” (14).
polytheism.”^69 It is the continued conflict “between this god and that” that can enchant our disenchanted world.

Vocation gives us “methods of thinking: the tools of the trade and the training needed to use them” (34). It does not preach the word of god, but teaches us how to live in a world of multiple gods. Rather than telling us how to act, authentic experience helps us “reckon with the ultimate meaning” of our actions. It helps us know which god we’ll serve and which god we’ll offend when we decide to act in a certain way.

While fickle and fact-averse, Conrad and García Márquez were fastidiously precise. Their precision is the end result of a commitment to technical practices and their concomitant technical vocabularies—including the words and maneuverers required for the successful telling of tales. They accept the disenchantment of the world as an ineluctable fact of modern life. Nevertheless, they struggle against “rational” and “monotheistic” systems of thought by dramatizing the collapse of various autochthonous practices with the arrival and implementation of singularizing economic modes and ideas. They show the silencing of practices that exist outside prepacked notions of what should be, such as those no longer considered “efficient,” “profitable” or “useful.”^70

In Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904), for example, the inauguration of Gould’s silver mine does away with a variety of artisanal practices irrelevant to Gould and his ilk: ox-hiding, silverwork, popular feasts. Gould’s vision of silver as a hard commodity eventually cannibalizes all other approaches to the metal. When we are first introduced

^69 It is our “culture’s destiny,” argues Weber, “to once more become clearly aware of our polytheistic past” (32).

^70 An emblematic example of the modern dethronement of polytheism is the mass commercialization of tobacco in the 19th century. Tobacco was first used by Andean people in varied ways. It was licked, drunk, smeared on, and used as droplets. Once tobacco became a universal, commercial product, its varied uses were relegated to the margins, while smoking it became the obvious thing to do with it.
to Nostromo we see him shrouded in ornaments produced by crafty human hands—embroidered leather, dainty silver buttons and sturdy yet decorative silver plates on horse tack equipment: “the enormous silver buttons on the embroidered leather jacket, the row of tiny silver buttons down the seam of the trousers, the snowy linen, a silk sash with embroidered ends, the silver plates on headstall and saddle, proclaimed the unapproachable style of the famous Capataz de Cargadores” (52).

By the end of the novel, Nostromo’s “unapproachable” style and his emblematically ornamental use of silver is replaced by Gould’s commercial and flattening approach to the same commodity. Silver becomes something that Nostromo retreats stealthily from elsewhere (the Great Isabel Island) and later exchanges for money—a retraction which is a pitiful parody of Gould’s own retreat and commodification of the silver he extracts from his mine.

The value of silver does not depend on humanity’s ability to work it, but on their ability to extract it. Nostromo’s treasure makes him distrustful of others and anti-social. An oppressive fear begins to darken his freedom: “he thought with the resolution of a master, and the cunning of a cowed slave” (231). We now see him walking the streets of Sulaco, “attending to his business,” wearing a “brown tweed suit” made “in the slums of London” (230). He buys this imported, mass-produced suit in the “clothing department of the Compañía Anzani,” which before becoming a proper “company” used to be owned and operated by “the universal storekeeper” Anzani and sold a mixed variety of goods, including silver figurines of human body parts used as votive offerings: “boots, silks, ironware, muslins, wooden toys, tiny silver arms, legs, heads, hearts (for ex-voto offerings), rosaries, champagne, women’s hats, patent medicines, even a few dusty books in paper covers and mostly in the French language” (66).
Having to protect and depend on his hidden treasure divests Nostromo not only of the elaborately hand-made products that before adorned his body but also of his singular personality. The previous capataz lived off his reputation. The people of Sulaco were “under the spell of that reputation that the Capataz de Cargadores had made for himself by the waterside, along the railway line, with the English and with the populace of Sulaco” (8). But the burden of his treasure makes Nostromo silent, taciturn like Gould, unable to speak and to feed people tales of his valor: “the shining specter of the treasure rose before him, claiming his allegiance in a silence that could not be gainsaid. He was afraid, because, neither dead nor alive, like the gringos on Azuera, he belonged body and soul to the unlawfulness of his audacity. He was afraid of being forbidden the island. He was afraid, and said nothing” (232; my emphasis). Nostromo, the prudent businessman, is no longer able to participate in a community that understands itself and its participants through the exchange of stories.

In García Márquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” the myriad possibilities contained in the winged man are mostly ignored. The townspeople can only see this apparition as a potential source of profit. They dismiss the creature’s other irrelevant—yet various and varied—qualities. Pelayo locks the creature in his chicken coop and charges “five cents admission to see the angel” (23). The miracles attributed to “the angel,” writes García Márquez, “like the blind man who didn’t recover his sight but grew three new teeth,” showed “a certain mental disorder,” and “ruined the angel’s reputation” (25). Eventually the people of the town get bored with “the angel,” preferring instead the narrative simplicity of the “traveling show of the woman who had been
changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents.” With the money gained from the angel's short-lived fame, Pelayo abandons his previous work as bailiff and becomes a rabbit breeder. His capitalization on an event that is extraordinary and amusing is a harbinger of monotony—the generative but essentially uncreative reproduction of rabbits.

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71 If storytellers spin yarns and weave tales, spiders spin silk and weave webs. The figure of the spider as storyteller is a common one in the history of literature. It famously comes up in book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. In this myth the mortal Arachne challenges Minerva, goddess of wisdom and crafts, to a weaving contest (see Figure 4). Arachne weaves a tapestry that depicts the gods’ mistreatment of mortals. Minerva weaves a tapestry that depicts benevolent and divine order. Arachne’s tapestry is flawless, kindling Minerva’s jealous rage. Ashamed of having offended a goddess, Arachne attempts to hang herself, but is transformed instead into a spider by Minerva. Arachne is a possible foil for Ovid—an image of the mortal poet and his material craft.

Another version of this “spectacle” is reenacted in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Here we are presented with the show of a woman who is decapitated for having disobeyed her parents (a show which is repeated every night).
**Labor at the Expense of Stories**

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt establishes another intriguing relation between work, stories and reality. Artisanal economies produce artisanal products—and they produce stories.\(^72\) Stories, to borrow Arendt’s terminology, are related to work, not labor. In laboring societies, argues Arendt, the “work of genius,” as “distinguished from the product of the craftsman,” interferes with speech and storytelling. It “appears to have absorbed those elements of distinctness and uniqueness which find their immediate expression only in action and speech” (219).\(^73\) That modern capitalism promotes and propagates processes of mechanical production and rote labor rather than work makes it cannibalistic and homogenizing—antipathetic to stories, storytellers, and the handiwork of local artisans.

In Arendt’s vocabulary, work, unlike labor, leads to the fabrication of “an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it...and that it is only a means to produce this end” (143). For Arendt, work is conclusive, carried out in order to produce something that, once produced, is finished, complete. Work, and our

\(^72\) In a similar vein, the stories produced by Benjamin’s storyteller depend upon a sense of community between speakers and listeners.

\(^73\) The passage in its entirety reads: “This protest, to be sure, is partly no more than a reaction against the vulgarization and commercialization of the notion of genius; but it is also due to the more recent rise of a laboring society, for which productivity or creativity is no ideal and which lacks all experiences from which the very notion of greatness can spring. What is important in our context is that the work of genius, as distinguished from the product of the craftsman, appears to have absorbed those elements of distinctness and uniqueness which find their immediate expression only in action and speech. The modern age’s obsession with the unique signature of each artist, its unprecedented sensitivity to style, shows a preoccupation with those features by which the artist transcends his skill and workmanship in a way similar to the way each person’s uniqueness transcends the sum total of his qualities. Because of this transcendence, which indeed distinguishes the great work of art from all other products of human hands, the phenomenon of the creative genius seemed like the highest legitimation for the conviction of homo faber that a man’s products may be more and essentially greater than himself” (219).
ability to make things via work, is our great human talent. “The task and potential
greatness of mortals,” writes Hannah Arendt in The Human Condition, “lie in their
ability to produce things—works and deeds and words” (19). We not only work to make
things, we also work to make words, words which we use to describe the process of
making, including the process of making words. The work of our hands, writes Arendt,
“fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human
artifice” (136).

For Arendt, stories produce action, and actions produce stories. Together, stories
and actions “start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the
newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into
contact” (184). This unique and ever-evolving web of human relationships, in which
stories are told and actions unfold, makes action impossible to fix, delimit, or totalize.
The web’s “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” make it so that “action almost
never achieves its purpose.” Arendt’s idea of stories as implicit in a web of ever-evolving
action and meaning defies Benjamin’s nostalgically static portrait of stories, in which the
ideal conditions for the creation and dissemination of stories have faded.

The realm of “real” action has no clear beginning and end; instead, it is constantly
reformulating and reinventing itself—essentially, retelling itself. According to Arendt, it
is only in “this medium” of constant change and interaction that “action alone is real,
that it ‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces
tangible things” (86; my emphasis). Once “produced,” these stories “may then be
recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works,
they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material” (87).

Labor can only be “capitalized” on or made profitable, argues Arendt, “through
violent oppression in a slave society.” Alternatively, she adds, “by exploitation in the
capitalist society of Marx’s own time it can be channeled in such a way that the labor of some suffices for the life of all” (88). The only way to justify this exploitation is through ideology, which necessarily interrupts not only our ability to work but also our ability to see what is authentic to our experience of the world.

This is the sort of exploitative economy Conrad sets out to depict in *Nostromo*—one in which “the labor of some suffices for the life of all.” According to Said, in *Nostromo*, “all the men—for all their differences in character and temperament—are slaves of the recurrent power of the mine” (“Conrad and Nietzsche,” 201). It is also the economy that García Márquez sets out to describe in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—a banana plantation imposed and directed by American executives. This plantation makes no sense on a purely local or traditional level. To be viable, its directors must resort to ideas about profitability and mass production alien to the place in which the bananas were first grown and consumed by the people who grew them.

Mercantile capitalist economies, such as the one Charles Gould introduces to Sulaco in *Nostromo* or the one Mr. Brown introduces to Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, eclipse artisanal economies and their concomitant stories. One way to conceptualize this distinction, following Arendt, is to think of mercantile economies as those which reap the benefits of human labor and artisanal economies as those that are grounded in work. “It is indeed the mark of all laboring,” writes Arendt, “that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent” (87).

Arendt’s ideas about work and labor—in particular, the relation she establishes between our ability to tell stories and our ability to act—are useful in understanding Conrad’s and García Márquez’s depiction of modernity. Actions and experiences are
disfigured in societies where a person’s work is interrupted and replaced with capitalist ideas about what work ought to be.

Conrad and García Márquez are interested in this disfigurement, as seen in the portrayal of characters who cannot act because they cannot work (Jim in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, the Colonel in García Marquez’s *No One Writes to the Colonel*). They describe characters who cannot experience the world because their ideas of what constitutes experience are adulterated—tainted by ideology and idealism, the engines of political systems that interfere with local work and making practices. Because superimposed and undigested, ideas of civilization, progress and cosmopolitanism make for a disingenuous form of experience. García Márquez and Joseph Conrad dramatize the deformation of experience through stories.

Part of Charles Gould’s enterprise in Conrad’s *Nostromo* is to accumulate enough dynamite to blow up the mine (should the need arise). This explosion would leave no trace. “‘Señor Hirsch,’ he says, ‘I have enough dynamite stored up at the mountain to send it down crashing into the valley’—his voice rose a little—‘to send half Sulaco into the air if I liked’”(123). Rather than being interested in the continued transmission of stories and costumes, of artisanship and skill, Gould is doing something else, which is potentially destructive rather than continually creative. Even though he is a citizen of Costaguana, he is not of the country. He does not, in fact, work in the mine, but is instead the recipient of its profits. He is more than happy to destroy it and send half of it “into the air.”

The prolific Buendías and their seemingly never-ending progeny are, by the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), reduced to nothing— “a whirlwind of dust and rubble” (421). The community that could have transmitted and preserved the story of the
clan orally has entirely died out. All that remains is a written account of their life, transcribed in an almost indecipherable language on dusty sheets of vellum by Melquíades—the perennial outsider and a possible image of the novel’s author.

Macondo was already a fearful whirlwind of dust and rubble being spun about by the wrath of the biblical hurricane when Aureliano skipped eleven pages so as not to lose time with facts he knew only too well, and he began to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror. Then he skipped again to anticipate the predictions and ascertain the date and circumstances of his death. Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth (400).
The writings of Conrad and García Márquez are responding to a literary construction—"the human condition," as defined by the traditional realist novel, which can favor “universality” at the expense of heteroglossia. Their works question the sort of economies of narration and of action that imperil the communal work environment that is conducive to stories. In this sense, García Márquez and Joseph Conrad can be said to have a common purpose as writers of realist romances.

74 The idea that artisanal economies are conducive to the production and diffusion of stories and that the written novel is the genre of industrialization is nicely illustrated by the tobacco factories of early 20th-century Cuba. In these factories a designated reader (un lector) would read texts aloud to the factory’s cigar rollers (torcedores). This monastic practice of reading aloud was established to edify (but also, in effect, to entertain) the rollers. The readers read all sorts of things, but mainly magazines and novels. Some of Cuba’s finest cigars are named after the titles of the rollers’ favorite works: Montecristo, Punch or Romeo y Julieta. Reading out loud to laborers in factories stands in direct opposition to the dynamic telling of stories which, according to Benjamin, takes places in workshops and is carried out (unhierarchically) by workers.
By reincorporating stories and storytelling structures into their works, Conrad and García Márquez attempt to de-alienate, or reenchant, the novel. This process of reenchantment necessarily entails a reversal of perspective—stories are told from the inside out rather than the outside in.

The opening paragraph of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a perfect example of this process of inversion. In this famous opening passage, the young Aureliano Buendía is taken by his father to “discover” ice. That “ice” is something that is being “discovered” immediately places the readers of the novel inside the life-story of a person from the hot periphery, whose knowledge of ice is theoretical rather than practical. In the broiling heat of Macondo, ice has no actual use or function. It is not a product of the land, and is therefore not integrated into local making practices and ways of knowing. The locals are tempted to make something of it—ice being cold, they imagine, could be useful to cool down Macondo. But all attempts to use ice to make something else are in vain. The people in Macondo are tempted to emulate the mercantilist rationalistic practice of making “discoveries” useful but are fundamentally unable to do so.

José Arcadio Buendía, for example, imagines a future Macondo in which ice blocks are “fabricated in large scales.” He convinces himself of the viability of this idea, because ice is, after all, made of another, in fact, common, and to him known, material—water. The problem with his reasoning is that although there is water in Macondo, there isn’t any cold—and because there isn’t any cold, there isn’t any ice, and, by extension, there aren’t any people in Macondo that know how to work or manipulate ice. That he can imagine a house made of ice in Macondo is an indication of how foreign this material is to him in any practical sense. His plans to make things out of ice are therefore
idealistic, futuristic, effective in his imagination only. Rather than bring about practical knowledge, his encounter with ice brings about delusions and unrealistic projections.

With the Macondeans’ repeated failure to instrumentalize ice, García Márquez dramatizes the incompleteness of theoretical knowledge—that is, the difficulty of really knowing things without experiencing them, and the proclivity to fantasize when practical experience is lacking. On the other hand, the knowledge gained through practice is harder to imagine or to describe theoretically, and is made visible in a diffracted way, through stories (rather than mystified by way of rationalizing explanations). The practical reality of the people of Macondo is hard for outsiders to understand theoretically—much as the actual, practical uses of ice elude José Arcadio’s grasp again and again. García Márquez also suggests that the ability to make the unknown useful is indicative of a colonial apparatus and infrastructure that transcends matters of actual utility, knowledge and experience.

Similarly, the misguided idealism of Conrad’s Europeans in Nostromo inadvertently promotes something other than what it proclaims to champion—violence rather than well-being, scarcity rather than abundance, isolation rather than cosmopolitanism. According to Jean Franco, in Nostromo “individuals might try to live

75 Of course, there are people who live amongst ice, such as the Inuit Yupik, in the Canadian Artic, or the Saami in Finland, who know ice well enough to make houses of it.

76 José Arcadio’s grand plan to make houses of ice after having “discovered” ice is a mimetic reenactment of a quintessentially colonial tactic—to make the “discovered” useful and produce it on a mass scale. The colonial venture “discovered” things in the New World, rather than “encountering” or “poaching” them. After “discovering” these things, it sought to make these things useful, salable, commercial. But to make these things useful it had to reconfigure, repurpose and recontextualize them (the uses that were given to these things by those they “discovered” were not those proposed and actually capitalized by the colonial venture). Interestingly enough, the most effective tactic to make these objects “useful” was to enslave the people found using them, or to import other enslaved people to do the work. This is true about the most successful American and African exports, cotton, tobacco, cocoa, gold, ivory, rubber and sugar.
according to ‘good faith’ and ‘honesty,’ yet, as the novel reveals, practiced within the dependency context, such virtues merely further a development whose main beneficiary was the metropolis” (201). These characters’ values, because they are dislocated and corrupt, perversely advance the interests of the metropolis at the expense of the periphery. Conrad expresses this dislocation by exaggerating the gap that exists between the messianic ideas the Goulds’ associate with their silver mine and the actual and devastating effects of this venture.

The narrator of *Nostromo* observes how Doña Emilia (Mrs. Gould) conflates the real value of silver with its symbolic value. Describing the time she “laid her unmercenary hands, with an eagerness that made them tremble, upon the first silver ingot turned out still warm from the mould,” the narrator calls our attention to the transcendental layers of meaning she gives to a simple lump of metal: “by her imaginative estimate of its power she endowed that lump of metal with a justificative conception, as though it were not a mere fact, but something far-reaching and impalpable, like the true expression of an emotion or the emergence of a principle” (117). Mrs. Gould’s ideas about what gold is and can do are as far-fetched as Jose Arcadio’s ideas about ice and show a lack of practical or experiential knowledge of the material itself—a lack which is substituted with inflated ideals and aspirations, which also conveniently conceal starkly ruthless and violent practices.
Conclusion

This chapter sought to establish an affiliation between Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez by way of the concept of “romance of reality.” By “romance of reality” I mean something specific: I am talking about a novelistic form that emerges from the crosspollination of what initially may seem to be two opposed literary inheritances: romance and realism.

Their novels offer us a romance of the practice of telling stories, as well as of the practice of craft—that is, a precondition for the telling of stories. It follows that a romance of local practices and storytelling mechanisms is also a romance of what is experientially known to a particular community. Despite there being a certain level of nostalgia in these authors’ wish to capture a community’s practices and tales, their romance is a romance of that which is profoundly real, real in a sense other than the one established by their novelistic predecessors, the 18th and 19th century realists. By depicting interruptions of craft, these authors reveal how such interruptions and impositions distort and interfere with our ability to see and to narrate the real, while also promoting storytelling as a dynamic and practice-bound episteme.
Chapter 2. Craft Interrupted

Here in her hairs,
The painter plays the spider and hath woven
A golden mesh t’ entrap the hearts of men
Faster than gnats in cobwebs.
—The Merchant of Venice

In the first chapters of this dissertation, I showed how the practice of craft is conducive to stories and storytelling, and how communal making processes encourage tales and tale tellers. The skills required to carry out a craft effectively inflect and determine the form and content of the stories told by the people whose livelihood depends, either directly or indirectly, on the execution of this craft. These skills endow those who possess them with particular seeing and telling abilities—techniques they use to observe, know and narrate what is nearest to them. In other words, craftsmen perceive and relate their world through a framework determined by reciprocal processes of making and telling. This seeing or perceiving has the power to render the idiosyncratic elements of a particular community into stories. It is grounded in the practical and the experiential, tying stories to the concrete and manipulable world—the real. Yet, because of its uniqueness, its reliance on pragmatic and transmissible experience, it also gives expression to rare and unexpected wonders—wonders grounded in practice.

This chapter will further explore the relation between the practice of making and the process of telling by playing close attention to Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez’s depiction of craft and storytelling. It will show how these two authors dramatize the relation between seeing and narrating, doing and knowing—a relation which is anything but stable in the peripheral worlds where many of their novels and
tales are set. In the works of Conrad and García Márquez, a community’s ability to see and to say—to tell stories—is compromised when autochthonous practices of making are interrupted, hijacked, idealized or misunderstood. When human beings become separated from the work of their hands, they become alienated not only from the land they inhabit and the material within it, but also from their ability to see, tell and do.

77 Gabriel García Márquez’s stories and novels (with a few minor exceptions, such as “El Verano feliz de la señora Forbes”), take place either in the Caribbean or in the fictional town of Macondo—a remote wetland village which is home to the Buendía family, the United Fruit Company and Melquiades’ alchemical laboratory. According to the Colombian critic Cristina Benavides, García Márquez’s literary universe can be split in two key moments: “el primero se caracteriza por construir un solo núcleo narrativo articulado en el espacio de Macondo, como universo simbólico; y el segundo momento corresponde a la producción literaria posterior a esta obra, el cual, aunque se sigue desarrollando en buena parte en el Caribe tropical, no lo hace dentro de los límites ficcionales de Macondo” “the first is characterized by the building of a single narrative nucleus bounded by Macondo, which functions as a symbolic universe; and the second moment corresponds to his subsequent literary productions, which develop largely in the tropical Caribbean, rather than within the fictional limits of Macondo’ (47; my translation.).

Most of Conrad’s novels are also set in peripheral places (with notable exceptions, such as The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes). Nostromo is set in the fictional republic of Costaguana, Lord Jim in the fictional republic of Patusan, Heart of Darkness in the Belgian Congo, Almayer’s Folly in the Indonesian village of Sambir. The same can be said about his most famous tales, “The Shadow-Line,” “An Outpost of Progress,” “The Secret Sharer,” and “The End of the Tether.” Nevertheless, in several of Conrad’s novels and stories there exists an interesting, deliberate disjunction between the place where his stories are set and where they are told. Heart of Darkness, mainly set in the Belgian Congo, is told by Marlow in the lower reaches of the Thames. “Youth,” set in the Eastern Seas, is told, again by Marlow, in an English pub. Where Marlow is while telling his tale of Jim is unclear.
Part 1. To Make Is to See, to See Is to Tell

Joseph Conrad’s story “The Secret Sharer” (1909) begins with a sea captain’s description of his newly assigned vessel. In this description, Conrad ties the captain’s ability to see to his role as captain, thus establishing a decisive link between craft and visibility, experience and relatability.

“The Secret Sharer” tells the story of an unnamed sea captain and a mysterious fugitive. The captain is a young man in charge of an unnamed British vessel anchored in the Meinam River in the Gulf of Siam. In this story, it is only after his ship “lay cleared for sea” that the captain can finally see it properly: “Fast alongside a wharf, littered like any ship in port with a tangle of unrelated things, invaded by unrelated shore people, I had hardly seen her yet properly. Now, as she lay cleared for sea, the stretch of her maindeck seemed to me very fine under the stars” (623).

When his ship is stationary, “fast alongside a wharf,” the captain cannot see it for what it is: a vessel designed specifically for movement on the surface of the water. Rather than emerging as an independent, functional object, the ship lies hidden amidst irrelevant visual noise—“a tangle of unrelated things, invaded by unrelated shore people” (623; my emphasis). It is only when the ship returns to its working context, the sea, the wind, the crew, that the captain really notices it, regardless of the darkness encroaching on it. There is an intimate link here between vision and functionality; when function is interrupted, so is vision. This link between craft and vision is, moreover, stronger than that between light and vision. It is, in fact, dark when the captain “sees” his vessel. The visible, it turns out, is something more, or something other, than what is illuminated. The visible is also the knowable, and the knowable is that which is understood by means of the skills and techniques acquired in the practice of craft.
The correspondence between form and function not only makes the ship in question visible and narratable, it is also, according to the captain, what makes it beautiful (“very fine under the stars”). Life at sea, claims the captain, is “invested with an elementary moral beauty by the absolute straightforwardness of its appeal and by the singleness of its purpose” (623). The practical link between stargazing and navigating strengthens the connection between harmony and functionality—until quite recently, celestial navigation was an essential sailorly skill without which steering was impossible.78 This relation between craftsmanship and the captain’s ability to see his ship is further strengthened at the level of syntax. For the captain to see his ship, it must first be unraveled, literally untangled, from an array of “unrelated things, invaded by unrelated shore people.” The act of untangling is reminiscent of practices of weaving. Conrad thereby ties seeing to processes of unraveling, and unraveling to processes of telling.79

78 In her book, The Novel and the Sea (2010), Margaret Cohen underscores the importance of celestial navigation and explores its literary manifestations in sea-based works of literature, such as Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe or James Fenimore Cooper’s Sea Tales. “Well into the nineteenth century, not every captain could afford a chronometer, and even when its use became widespread, celestial navigation was still an artisanal enterprise, attended by great consequences in the event of human error” (54). The “finely-tuned art of navigation so admirable in craft, that is to say, flourishes in conditions of lack, compensating for deficiencies in knowledge” (56).

79 The connection between storytelling and weaving is ancient, recurrent and widespread. Etymologically, text and textile are related—they share the stem “textere,” to weave. In the words of the Canadian poet and typographer Robert Bringhurst: “An ancient metaphor: thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns—but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver” (25). According to French historian John Scheid, “among the metaphors that have been used in the West—and elsewhere—to designate linguistic activity, weaving occupies a place of primary importance” (110). The “metaphor of textual weaving,” continues Scheid, “seems to convey a distant truth, the lexical memory of which has been maintained by Indo-European languages” (112). The Greeks “chose the term rhapsōidós, ‘he who resews the song,’ to designate not the author, but the Panhellenic reciter of these same poems” (126). According to Jane Snyder, “for several reasons weaving was closely linked in the Greek mind to singing, and that this link led naturally to the Greek lyric poets’ use of metaphors derived from the art of weaving to describe their own art as a ‘web of song’” (193).
At night, while surveying his ship, the captain notices something amiss—the rope side-ladder of his vessel had not been “hauled in as it should have been” (623). When he goes to haul in the ladder himself, he sees a strange, glimmering object floating near it. “But I saw at once something elongated and pale floating very close to the ladder . . . With a gasp I saw revealed to my stare a pair of feet, the long legs, a broad livid back immersed right up to the neck in a greenish cadaverous glow. One hand, awash, clutched the bottom rung of the ladder. He was complete but for the head. A headless corpse!” (624). The captain assumes the floating thing is a headless cadaver, but after further inspection, realizes it’s a living body.

The captain’s knowledge of sailorly protocol, of when to haul in his ship’s ladder or not, causes him to see this elusive and strange figure. The practice of craft—sailing, in this particular case, or “captain-being”—allows him not only to see this figure, but also to tell the tale of this strange encounter. The manual hauling of a ladder, is, in this case, a symbol of the story itself, which is looming ahead of us, ready to unfold.

80 In “Boats and Knitting Machines: Objects of Doom in Hardy and Conrad,” Stephanie Bernard argues that, in many of Conrad’s works, floating boats allow “for the story and the narration to unfold and linger on” (6). Ships in Conrad, she argues, “move the story and trigger the narrative because they appear either too motionless, as in Heart of Darkness or as in ‘The Shadow-Line,’ in which total quietness and absence of wind, together with fever, threaten the whole crew, or uncontrollably restless as in The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” (7).

81 Leggatt’s disembodied hand, clutching the ladder (“One hand, awash, clutched the bottom rung of the ladder”) is a complex image of the relation between manual practices and telling processes. It is a glimpse of what happens when the role of the hand in the practice of making and telling is alienated or abstract. It could be read, in this sense, as a possible image of Conrad’s own relation to storytelling and craft. Conrad began to write professionally when his sailing career was already over. His stories therefore exist in a context separate from the practice of his craft (sailing). That is, they happen apart or after the fact, rather than during or within it. This sets Conrad apart from Benjamin’s idealized storyteller, whose relation to the practice of making is direct. In her article, “Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft,” Esther Leslie analyzes the role of the hand in Benjamin’s cosmology. “The hand,” she writes, “is central in Benjamin’s comprehension of experience” (6). The hand is, for Benjamin, redemptive—the organ with which experience can be recovered. However, the hand “does not work in isolation.” “Intrinsic to the craftsman, and the gesticulating storyteller, too, is the accord of soul, eye and hand. Thinking, seeing, handling in tandem, this mesh grants a praxis.”
The body is Leggatt’s, the ex-chief mate of a neighboring vessel, *The Sephora*, a strong and quiet, “fish-like” man. Leggatt is fleeing *The Sephora* because he unintentionally killed one of its crew members in a fight, and did not want to face criminal prosecution. (The jury, he concluded, would decide against him). The captain is struck by the fugitive’s intriguing situation and his impressive strength (he’s been swimming for several hours straight).

The first thing the captain does after hauling Leggatt in is clothe him: “The man in the water began suddenly to climb up the ladder, and I hastened away from the rail to fetch some clothes” (625). The moment he dresses him, he sees him more clearly. The captain’s own sleeping-suit turns out to be “just right for his size.” It reveals Leggatt as “a well-knit young man fellow of 25 at most” (626; my emphasis). The adverb “well-knit” is descriptive not only of Leggatt’s character, but also of Conrad’s literary artifice—his skill as storyteller and character creator. Once dressed, Leggatt is no longer a mysterious, glimmering creature, but an uncannily familiar one:

I got a sleeping-suit out of my room and, coming back on deck, saw the naked man from the sea sitting on the main-hatch, glimmering white in the darkness, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. In a moment he had concealed his damp body in a sleeping-suit of the same grey-stripe pattern as the one I was wearing and *followed me like my double* on the poop (626; my emphasis).

Through stories Conrad makes the strange familiar, integrating the unusual and the unheard of into a communal narrative tapestry. This incorporation, however, is

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Conrad’s integration of storytelling practices grounded in craft and technical expertise is a self-conscious recreation of Benjamin’s ideal praxis. But this recreation is necessarily ironic, intensely aware of its redemptive and restitutive intentions, and of its own material, physical distance from the practices in question.
integrative without being dogmatically assimilative—it incorporates the strange without explaining it away.

In Gabriel García Márquez’s short story, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” (1968), craft and visibility, making and telling, come together as they do in “The Secret Sharer.” In this story a “drowned man” is dressed by a group of seamstresses. The act of dressing the “drowned man” serves to reveal him more truly to the townspeople who encounter him, allowing them to incorporate his unusualness into their daily lives. In this manner, the making of clothes becomes a metaphor for the process of word weaving, of storytelling.

“The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” tells the story of a small and remote Caribbean town, which forever changes when the gigantic corpse of a drowned foreigner washes ashore. The town’s children are the first to spot the cadaver. Having never encountered such a gigantic figure, the children are slow to realize what this “floating promontory” actually is. At first, they think it is “an enemy ship,” later, a whale. Finally, when they remove the clumps of seaweed, jellyfish tentacles, and remnants of fish and flotsam, they realize it is a “drowned man.” It is through a manual process of extraction and removal that this sea-strange creature becomes recognizable.

The townsmen drag the enormous body from the beach into the town—the heaviest body they’ve ever dragged. In town, the women prepare the body for burial—cleaning, combing, and clothing it. The women are amazed, since they have never seen a man so big and so beautiful as this one. Because of their amazement, rather than really seeing him, they idealize him and the conditions that betokened his arrival. “Mientras cosían sentadas en círculo, contemplando el cadáver entre puntada y puntada, les parecía que el viento nunca había sido tan tenaz ni el Caribe había estado nunca tan
ansioso como aquella noche, y suponían que los cambios tenían algo que ver con el muerto” ‘As they sewed, sitting in a circle and gazing at the corpse between stitches, it seemed to them that the wind had never been so steady nor the sea so restless as on that night and they supposed that the change had something to do with the dead man’ (275; 232). 82 While sewing a gigantic pair of trousers and a shirt for the dead man, the women construct a panegyric, yet speculative, narrative about his past. “Pensaban que si aquel hombre magnífico hubiera vivido en el pueblo, su casa habría tenido las puertas más anchas, el techo más alto y el piso más firme, y el bastidor de su cama habría sido de cuadernas maestras con pernos de hierro, y su mujer habría sido la más feliz” ‘They thought that if that magnificent man had lived in the village, his house would have had the widest doors, the highest ceiling, and the strongest floor, his bedstead would have been made from a midship frame held together by iron bolts, and his wife would have been the happiest woman’ (275; 232).

Once the women finish sewing the clothes and put them on the dead man’s body, their illusion crumbles—the clothes do not fit the body well. They make the body look unwieldy and pedestrian. “Pero fue una ilusión vana. El lienzo resultó escaso, las pantalones mal cortados y peor cosidos le quedaron estrechos, y las fuerzas ocultas de su corazón hacían saltar los botones de la camisa” ‘But it was a vain illusion. There had not been enough canvas, the poorly cut and worse sewn pants were too tight, and the hidden strength of his heart popped the buttons on his shirt.’ (275; 232). Unlike the Captain’s pajamas, which fit Leggatt’s body perfectly, the pants and shirt sewn by García Márquez’s townswomen are too small for the “floating promontory.” The giant’s “uncommon body” becomes suddenly, painfully, intimately visible. The overwrought

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82 Translations of García Márquez’s short stories are taken from Collected Stories, a collection of García Márquez’s stories translated into English by Gregory Rabassa and J. S. Bernstein in 1984.
stiches make the cadaver seem familiar and near, rather than “magnificent” and ideal:
“Fue entonces cuando comprendieron cuánto debió haber sido de infeliz con aquel
cuerpo descomunal, si hasta muerto lo estorbaba. Lo vieron condenado en vida a pasar
de medio lado por las puertas, a descalabrase con los travesaños, a permanecer de pie
en las visitas sin saber que hacer con sus tiernas y rosadas manos de buey de mar” “It was
then that they understood how unhappy he must have been with that huge body since it
bothered him even after death. They could see him in life, condemned to going through
doors sideways, cracking his head on crossbeams, remaining on his feet during visits, not
knowing what to do with his soft, pink, sea lion hands’ (276; 233). The drowned man, far
from being the greatest in town, turned out to be the most unwieldy—forced to fit into a
structure that could not, in fact, fit him. The women’s handiwork highlights the
inconvenience of the giant’s own “sea-lion” hands.

The craft of sewing allows the townswomen to spin a fantastic tale about the
drowned man, but also to dismantle it. The combined process of making and telling leads
the women to see the drowned man in another, more realistic, more personal light—he’s
a misfit, a local giant. He may be too big for their town, but he is no longer completely
separate from it. The clothes do not fit his enormous body well, but at least they are
home-sewn. Through making and telling, seeing and naming, the women appropriate the
strange man, rather than abstractly idealize him.

Having come to see the drowned man more realistically, the women are ready to
name him: he was, “without doubt,” Esteban. Once named, the townspeople adopt the
body as their own, integrating the marvelous into the real thorough a combined process
of making and telling:

Era Esteban. No hubo que repetirlo para que lo reconocieran. Si les hubieran
dicho Sir Walter Raleigh, quizás hasta ellos se habrían impresionado con su

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He was Esteban. It was not necessary to repeat it for them to recognize him. If they had been told Sir Walter Raleigh, even they might have been impressed with his gringo accent, the macaw on his shoulder, his cannibal-killing blunderbuss, but there could be only one Esteban in the world and there he was, stretched out like a sperm whale, shoeless, wearing the pants of an undersized child, and with those stony nails that had to be cut with a knife. (235)

Esteban is gigantic, but not incomprehensible or unrecognizable. His stony nails, although enormous, are ultimately manageable. Esteban is no impressive foreign figure, no exotic, awe-inspiring type like Sir Walter Raleigh. Instead, he is just another foolish villager, albeit an enormous one.

It is only after the townspeople make this strange and gigantic creature their own—namable, recognizable—that they begin to live under its guidance. They plan to transform their town so that this “big boob” and “handsome fool” can live comfortably in it: “Pero también sabían que todo sería diferente desde entonces, que sus casa iban a tener las puertas más anchas, los techos más altos, los pisos más firmes, para que el recuerdo de Esteban pudiera andar por todas partes sin tropezar con los travesaños” ‘But they also knew that everything would be different from then on, that their houses would have wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors so that Esteban’s memory could go everywhere without bumping into beams’ (279; 238). By planning to make their village into Esteban’s village, the townspeople realize their illusory ambition of becoming important, distinctive, un-remote. That this transformation is not in fact realized but only spoken of shows García Márquez’s cynical yet pragmatic idealism. He proposes an alternative future for remote Caribbean towns in which towns are built from the inside
out rather than the outside in, and strange, grandiose ideas and aspiration are clad, even if awkwardly, in local garb. He also dramatizes the process by which this future can come to fruition: through the incorporation of strangeness by way of local craft and storytelling mechanisms, which render the strange prosaic rather than ideal without diminishing it. This future is only provisional—and also remains unaccomplished.

In Joseph Conrad’s “A Secret Sharer,” a vessel surrounded by “unrelated shore people” is invisible, estranged from its role as vessel. This estrangement does not make the vessel stand out, but buries it in the crowd. Similarly, the character of Leggatt is, at first, difficult to see. He becomes more legible the moment he is integrated into the captain’s ship and its daily functions—an incorporation which is analogous to a concomitant process of telling and retelling. The moment the captain dresses Leggatt in his own clothes, Leggatt’s strange story becomes entangled in the captain’s own story. Dressed in the captain’s clothes, Leggatt is no longer a strange, glowing, indeterminate mass, but a surprisingly recognizable, human figure. What is strange now is just how recognizable he ends up being. In this process of dramatic and ironic reversals, Leggatt’s extreme familiarity becomes the actually unfamiliar thing.

In Gabriel García Márquez’s “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World,” a group of seamstresses try to make clothes for an oversized cadaver. The clothes the women make, are, as clothes, inadequate: they do not fit the body well. In another sense, however, the clothes are perfectly adequate—the ill-fitting clothes allow the women to see the body in a more familiar and comprehensible light. Esteban’s enormousness becomes legible as a familiar sign of inadequacy and ineptitude rather than of unattainable grandiosity. The making of clothes allows the women to integrate the story of the “drowned man” into their own narrative fabric and praxis. Esteban is no longer an...
ideal, foreign creature, but a local, familiar one. Through a collaborative process of making and telling, Esteban is made familiar without being belittled. His strangeness, although recognizable, is not, ultimately, written off. Towns like the one in this story, García Márquez suggests, are doomed to stay remote. The only potential remedy to this remoteness is the collective processes of making and the stories that emerge alongside these processes. Tales are uniquely able to make the strange local and knowable—homemade and ill-fitting, yet grandiose.

This insistence on the prior quality of craftsmanship is related to Conrad’s and García Márquez’s own sense of the task of storytellers, their ability to make visible the strange and the unique, without denying or minimizing its uniqueness. That García Márquez and Joseph Conrad are not just tellers but writers of tales makes their insistence on craft and collective storytelling processes modern and ironic—for the written novel is the genre of the solitary and the alienated par excellence.
Part 2. The Deformation and Reformation of Craft in *Heart of Darkness* and *No One Writes to the Colonel*

The disjuncture between rhetoric and practice is key to García Márquez’s and Conrad’s romances of reality, which seek to reenchant the world by revealing its marvelous yet experientially-grounded reality through stories. Retelling the world through tales grounded in craft and experience narrows the gap between ideologically tainted political and economic parlance and a community’s actual political and economic reality.

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* tells the story of Marlow’s journey up and down the Congo River. As he travels down the river, Marlow observes the machinations of the Belgian empire, which interfere with the company members’ ability to work and to speak—and by extension see—what is real. According to Marlow, “there was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came out of it” (21). That nothing comes out of it, in turn, makes it unreal on both a practical and a linguistic level: “[the station] was as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work.” Work is a show rather than a skill—a phantom appearance. Moreover, making work into a show presages the emptying out of language. When making is mystified, so is telling.83

83 The confusion between the ideological pretenses of the Belgian mission in the Congo and its actual intentions is nicely staged in Marlow’s meeting with his aunt in the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow’s aunt thinks Marlow is a “Worker” for the Belgian empire—something other than the mere captain of a steamboat. “It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle” (10). Marlow’s work, however, is to captain a ship, not to extract ivory or “civilize” savages. His aunt’s talk of “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” makes Marlow “quite uncomfortable,” prompting him to remind her “that the Company was run for profit.” Marlow’s subtle reminder of the Company’s actual intentions in the Congo is an attempt to demystify ideological discourses which at time were widespread and served to obfuscate the rampant violence, pillaging and enslavement of other people that was a taking place in Africa. His aunt’s confusion, Marlow adds, was probably due to “rot let loose in print and talk just about that time.” In his book, *King
The Company’s manager, Marlow notes, was “a common trader . . . nothing more” (18). The Manager does not make anything. Instead, his job is to perpetuate the status quo through a process of replication or routine rather than origination or making. “He originated nothing,” says Marlow, “he could keep the routine going—that’s all.” Nor does the manager say anything of substance—his smile, observes Marlow “came at the end of his speeches like a seal applied on the word to make the meaning of the commonest word appear absolutely inscrutable.” The manager uses language to mystify rather than communicate, a mystification sustained and justified by his inability to make, or originate, anything out of the earth’s material.84

Leopold’s Ghost, Adam Hochschild argues, “In Kurtz’s intellectual pretensions, Conrad caught one telling feature of the white penetration of the Congo, where conquest by pen and ink so often confirmed the conquest by rifle and machine gun” (147). It was as if “the act of putting Africa on paper,” continues Hochschild, “were the ultimate proof of the superiority of European Civilization.” Hochschild is referring here in particular to the writings of Léon Rom, a Belgian soldier and colonial officer who commanded a Belgian station in Stanley Falls. Rom, argues Hochschild, was probably the inspiration for Conrad’s Kurtz. Rom famously used the severed heads of Congolese to decorate his house at Stanley Falls, an image which is reproduced in Heart of Darkness. Marlow’s talk, and his printed tale, is enigmatic but not obfuscatory, and so contrasts with the mendacious, ideological, propagandistic tone of works such as Rom’s Le Nègre du Congo (1899).

84 The Belgian enterprise’s reliance on extractive economic process, as in the exploitation of rubber and ivory, not only interferes with its emissaries’ work, but also, and even more perversely, with the locals’ ability to work. According to the Belgian historian David Van Reybrouk, the Belgian mission in the Congo left “the fields fallow. Agriculture dwindled to the raising of only the most basic staples. Native commerce came to a standstill. Crafts in the process of refinement for centuries, such as iron smithing or woodcarving, were lost” (94). In like manner, riverine commerce, previously helmed by local carriers, “was taken over entirely by the Europeans.” (See Figure 2).

The Belgian extraction of rubber and ivory depended on the enslavement of millions of Congolese laborers. Collection quotas were demanded from locals as a form of “taxation.” Failure to meet these quotas was punishable by mutilation (when the Belgian administrators were feeling charitable) or death (see Figure 1). To meet the quotas, local people had to abandon their previous ways of living and making and participate instead in an alien and alienating, exhaustive and exhausting extraction and exportation of local resources.

At the same time, a renewed and intensified interest in African craft was taking hold in Europe. In the office of the inept brickmaker in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Marlow sees “a collection of spears, assegais, shields, knives” hung up “in trophies” (21). The effective disarmament of the people the company has enslaved is symbolically represented in the collection of artifacts. That is, local craft becomes an aesthetic object once
Instead of working, the Company members “wandered here and there with their absurd long staves” (29). Instead of telling, they recite and worship. Instead of making, they wander and proselytize. “The word ‘ivory,’” says Marlow, “rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it” (20). A stout man with a moustache holding a tin pail insists that everything in the company is “behaving splendidly, splendidly.” As he leans to scoop water out of the river, Marlow notices that “there was a hole in the bottom of his pail.” The repetition of the word “splendid,” imitates the repetitive yet vacuous process of ivory extraction. The hole in the pail reminds us of just how far away this imperial practice of extraction is from processes of technical creation and the experience that comes of the skilled execution of such creative processes. Work, if we follow Arendt’s definition in *The Human Condition*, leads to the production of a concrete thing, of an end (which is then transformed into a means), or an object of use. The water slipping out of the pilgrim’s pail is an image of incontinency, of drainage—an image which directly opposes the contained form of matter shaped into being by the work of the human hand.

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the conditions for its demise have been implemented. African craft becomes trendy and expensive in the European art market the moment supply is diminished by enslavement and genocide. Kurtz’s artwork in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, argues Urmila Seshagiri in her book *Race and the Modernist Imagination*, suggests that “modern aesthetic sensibilities will be elementally informed by disintegrations, disjunctions and discontinuities” (44).

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85 According to Arendt, “against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature” (220). For Arendt, “the impulse toward repetition comes from the craftsman’s need to earn his means of subsistence, in which case working coincides with laboring or it comes from a demand for multiplication in the market, in which case the craftsman who wishes to meet this demand has added, as Plato would have said, the art of earning money to his craft” (211). The work of humans is altered under capitalism. “The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such,” argues Arendt, “but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men.”
In the Middle Station, Marlow meets a “young, aristocrat” whose business is, in theory, brickmaking. However, “there wasn’t a fragment of a brick anywhere in station, and he had been there more than a year—waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something; I don’t know what—straw maybe” (21). The Brickmaker cannot make bricks because there is nothing that he can see around him that he can use to make them.86 Instead, he “sees” ivory.87 The brickmaker has no cognizance of the material of the land he inhabits, and therefore cannot use it to mold things. Rather than creating something, the brickmaker waits for Europe to send him the material he needs. There is something fanatical in this act of waiting: “Anyways it could not be found there, and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe, it did not appear clear to me what he was waiting for. An act of special creation perhaps” (21). Creation is, in this case, external, “special,” as in pre-Darwinian biology—peculiar to the species, bearing no relation to the rest of nature.

Marlow’s antidote to the Company’s incompetence and its deflected and distorting view of reality is work: “I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life” (20). His ability to work is, in turn, related to his ability not only to grasp reality (“the redeeming facts of life”), but to give an account of it. Marlow’s suggestion that the brickmaker use straw to make bricks is a subtle allusion to the brickmaker’s inability to spin a tale, and a reminder of Marlow’s own talent as both craftsman and storyteller.

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86 Bricks were a distinctly French and Belgian industrial product and very much out of place in the Congo.

87 The main thing Conrad’s pilgrims are able to see in Africa is white ivory.
As Marlow steps into the Company’s offices (somewhere, we presume, in the center of Brussels), he stumbles upon “two women, one fat and the other slim” (7). The women “sat on straw-bottom chairs, knitting black wool.” Later in his tale, Marlow remembers these women as “guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes” (8). The women, he imagines, are knitting something macabre—a pall to spread over a dead man’s coffin.88

The women’s knitting calls to mind not only Marlow’s manner of sailing into the heart of the Congo, but also his style of narration and taletelling, thereby drawing a crucial link between craft and taletelling. Marlow’s journey up and down the river is a meandering excursion into the unknown. His taletelling follows a similar pattern. The topology of Marlow’s story, like the Fates’ black pall, is dark and complex. It is nested in a series of frames and moves meanderingly in and out of voids and loops. It is potentially comprehensible, perhaps, as a complete tapestry, but by no means as a series of discrete units.

A simultaneous interruption of the practice of craft and storytelling also occurs in Conrad’s Nostromo. In part two, chapter five of Nostromo, Sulaco is in the midst of a political revolution: the Riberists against the Moneterists against the Goulds against all and sundry local bandits.89 At this point we meet Mr. Hirsch, an itinerant businessman

88 There has been plenty of critical speculation concerning the role and function of these two enigmatic characters. For Jeremy Hawthorne, these women’s “resemblance to the Fates of classical mythology is clearly intended” (73). For Tzvetan Todorov, the two women, one of them passively searching for knowledge, the other pointing to knowledge which escapes her, “announce how the tale will unfold” (164).

89 A veritable bellum omnium contra omnes. The state of men “without civil society,” argues Thomas Hobbes in De Cive (1642), “is nothing else but a mere war of all against all” (49). The “complicated and subtle” character of Conrad’s political thought, argues Roger D. Spegele, “is clearly compatible with Hobbes’ political
(and Conrad’s racist archetypal portrait of a traveling Jewish trader). Hirsch, an ox-hide salesman by trade, is trying to sell dynamite to Charles Gould. Hirsch is a good teller of tales, a consequence, we suppose, of his proximity to artisans as a journeyman hide merchant.

Hirsch’s account of his encounter with Nostromo follows the conventions of a Proppian folk tale. Hirsch is being led to what Propp calls “the whereabouts of an object of search”—Gould’s patronship (Propp 32). This “object” is “located in ‘another’ or ‘different’ kingdom”—that is, Sulaco—which lies “deep down vertically” from Esmeralda—the town of Hirsch’s provenance (Propp 33). Traveling towards his “object of search,” Hirsch encounters the tale’s villain, a “man on a grey horse with his hat down on his eyes” (122). This man, continues Mr. Hirsch, “rode up at speed, and touching my foot with the toe of his boot, asked me for a cigar, with a blood-curdling laugh. He did not seem armed, but when he put his hand back to reach for the matches I saw an enormous revolver strapped to his waist. I shuddered. He had very fierce whiskers.”

Hirsch’s playful description of Nostromo plays with timing and props to paint a threatening chiaroscuro of the armed Capataz.


90 For a more thorough exploration of Conrad’s anti-Semitic portrait of Hirsch and its symbolic function in the text, see Gillon.

91 The link between traveling and storytelling is an established one. Of all fictions, argues Frye, “the marvelous journey is the one formula that is never exhausted” (Anatomy of Criticism 63). The specific relationship between stories, traveling and craft is sketched out in Benjamin’s storyteller essay. According to Peter Brooks in “The Story of the Story of the Story,” Benjamin’s tale “comes to life in the milieu of work and travel and trade: it is an oral transaction in the workshop or with a traveler returned to tell his adventures to those at home. Above all, it involves one living person transmitting experience of life to another in a vital exchange” (31).
Gould’s mine and the political uncertainty it has exacerbated have done away with Mr. Hirsch’s trade. “Evidently this was no time for extending a modest man’s business,” says Hirsch about doing business in a time of revolution. Mr. Hirsch curses the whole country of Costaguana, “with all its inhabitants, partisans of Ribiera and Montero alike.” The thought of “the innumerable ox-hides going to waste among the dreamy expanse of the Campo” makes him tearful and angry (124). Rather than being tanned and exchanged, the hides, protests Hirsch, are “with no profit to anybody—rotting where they had been dropped by men called away to attend the urgent necessities of political revolutions.”

Gould remains indifferent to Hirsch’s stories and uninterested in his merchandise, which he seems to find anachronistic and irrelevant to the modern market. Gould is stolid and curt in response to Hirsch’s fearful, romantically costumbrista description of Nostromo. “If it was the Capataz de Cargadores you met—and there is no doubt, is there?—you were perfectly safe” (123). But Gould is more than

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92 The tanning of ox-hides, Sulaco’s main local economic activity before Charles Gould’s reanimation of the mine, is a practice ancient enough to appear in the Odyssey. Ox-hides there stand for craft but also for entertainment and hospitality. Homer’s heroes lie on them while they tell and listen to stories. “Off in the entrance-hall the great king made his [Odysseus’s] bed, spreading out on the ground the raw hide of an ox...and there Odysseus lay...plotting within himself the suitors’ death” (337). In a more subtle sense, ox-hiding stands for the techniques of storytelling. Ox-hide production, like the telling of tales, is a technically sophisticated craft, which requires a subtle understanding of layers. Odysseus is “the great teller of tales,” the expert handler of narrative layers.

93 Costumbrismo, a cultural trend which flourished in 19th-century Latin America, sought the representation of local costumes and scenes, often in exoticized ways. Undercurrents of “social negotiation and identity construction,” argues Mey-Yen Moriuchi, permeate costumbrista compositions. Costumbrismo, argues Jean Franco, was “a nineteenth-century response to modernization.” It aimed to capture old customs “as quaint anachronisms on the verge of disappearance,” and it was “expressed in descriptive sketches of human residues left behind by progress.” Joseph Conrad’s close friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham writes Franco in “Regionalism in the Novel and Short Story” was “one of the few British masters of costumbrismo, a portraitist of wild places, whose lawless bohemianism has...a fine and genuine quality” (195). Conrad’s depiction of Latin American scenes in Nostromo often follow costumbrista models.
impassive, he is dogmatically taciturn: “The King of Sulaco had words enough to give him [Mr. Hirsch] all the mysterious weight of a taciturn force. His silences, backed by the power of speech, had as many shades of significance as uttered words in the way of assent, of doubt, of negation.” Gould’s taciturnity, and the power behind his silence, stand in contrast to Mr. Hirsch’s stories, which annoy Gould more than they amuse him. To Hirsch, “anxious about the export of hides, the silence of Charles Gould portended a failure.”

In Gabriel García Márquez’s *No One Writes to the Colonel*, the weaving of a narrative mesh out of what is unknowable is also dramatized. In this novel, I propose, García Márquez picks up the threads of the world Conrad left behind in *Heart of Darkness*. *No One Writes to the Colonel* is set in a post-colonial Caribbean town whose inhabitants are destitute and forlorn. This desolation is in large part the end result of years of civil war, humanizing and civilizing clerics, foreign entrepreneurs, censorship and capricious local politics—the consequences of the colonial enterprise that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* anticipates. The question that emerges now is not what happens to creation when ideology takes its place, but how to create in a world that ideology and empire have impoverished.

*No One Writes to the Colonel* tells the story of a retired Colonel who spends his days waiting for his pension to arrive, but it never does. His wife spends her days keeping their house and urging her husband to find money, but the Colonel is unable to find any money and refuses to sell his things—including his son’s potentially winning gamecock—clinging to the belief that one day his pension will arrive or that his son’s rooster will win a big fight. He spends his time in the town’s different offices, stores and workshops. Despite his various incursions and excursions, every night he returns home empty-
handed. Once home, he can no longer evade his family’s pressing material want. “Habría preferido permanecer allí hasta el Viernes siguiente para no presentarse con las manos vacías. Pero cuando cerraron la sastrería tuvo que hacerle frente a la realidad.” ‘He would have preferred to stay there until the next Friday to keep from having to face his wife that night with empty hands. But when the tailor shop closed, he had to face up to reality’ (35: 44; my emphasis). When his wife asks him about his pension, the colonel replies “nothing,” a response which pervades and recurs in the novel—in No One Writes to the Colonel nothing is continually begetting nothing.

The colonel and his wife do not live off his pension, but off the various products of the land, which are otherwise indeterminate and valueless—unrecognized, nameless, fungible floating chunks of unsellable stuff. The colonel’s wife “revolvía la olla donde hervían cortadas en trozos todas las cosas de comer que la tierra del trópico es capaz de producir” ‘she stirred the pot where all the things to eat that the tropical land is capable of producing, cut into pieces, were boiling’ (24; 15). The clash between illusion and reality, between expected affluence and effective emptiness, is reenacted in the relation between the Colonel and his wife. The colonel lives under the illusion of potential governance, his wife under the harsh exigencies of survival in the midst of destitution and neglect—a neglect which is hard to redress given the phony aspirational discourses and illusions by which it is deflected.

The Colonel’s wife, increasingly unconvinced that her husband’s pension will arrive, sustains their family by scavenging and reassembling bits and pieces. She cannot cling to his belief in the pension because she is harassed by the actual business of survival. This has made her into the ultimate craftswoman, miraculously able to make

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94 All translations of García Márquez’s No One Writes to the Colonel are taken from J. S. Bernstein’s 1986 translation.
things out of “el vacío,” ‘the void.’ “Con su asombrosa habilidad para componer, zurcir y
remendar, ella parecía haber descubierto la clave para sostener la economía doméstica
en el vacío” ‘With her astonishing capacity for darning, sewing, and mending, she
seemed to have discovered the key to sustaining the household economy with no money’
(17; 19).

Her apparently miraculous ability to make something out of nothing never ceases
to impress the Colonel. Every time they sit down to have dinner, the colonel repeats the
phrase: “‘Este es el milagro de la multiplicación de los panes” ‘This is the miracle of the
multiplying loaves’ (19; 31). She is, in this sense, a metaphor for the actual, albeit
miraculous, creative capacity that sustains the household economy—an image of creation
amidst an illusion of providence that impoverishes and delays rather than nourishes and
foments.

The Colonel’s wife creates new and imaginative apparel out of scraps much as she
creates edibles out of chaff:

El calor de la tarde estimuló el dinamismo de la mujer. Sentada entre las
begonias del corredor junto a una caja de ropa inservible, hizo otra vez el eterno
milagro de sacar prendas nuevas de la nada. Hizo cuellos de mangas y puños de
tela de la espalda y remiendo cuadrados, perfectos, aun con retazos de diferente
color. Una cigarra instaló su pito en el patio. El sol maduró. Sólo levantó la
cabeza al anochecer cuando el coronel volvió a la casa. Entonces se apretó el
cuello con las dos manos, se desajustó las coyunturas; dijo: “Tengo el cerebro
tieso como un palo”.

–Siempre lo has tenido así –dijo el coronel, pero luego observó el cuerpo de
la mujer enteramente cubierto de retazos de colores–. Pareces un pájaro
carpintero.

–Hay que ser medio carpintero para vestirte –dijo ella. Extendió una camisa
fabricada con género de tres colores diferentes, salvo el cuello y los puños que
eran del mismo color. (15)
The afternoon heat stimulated the woman’s energy. Seated among the begonias in the veranda next to a box of worn-out clothing, she was again working the eternal miracle of creating new apparel out of nothing. She made collars from sleeves, and cuffs from the backs and square patches, perfect ones, although with scraps of different colors. A cicada lodged its whistle in the patio.

The sun faded. But she didn’t see it go down over the begonias. She raised her head only at dusk when the colonel returned home. Then she clasped her neck with both hands, cracked her knuckles, and said: ‘My head is as stiff as a board.’

‘It’s always been that way,’ the colonel said, but then he saw his wife’s body covered all over with scraps of color.

‘You look like a magpie.’

‘One has to be half a magpie to dress you,’ she said.

She held out a shirt made of three different colors of material except for the collar and cuffs, which were of the same color. (18)

Her creations are born of necessity or, as the narrator of this passage says, “out of nothing.” Institutional unreliability (i.e., her husband’s never-arriving pension) has forced her to become an imaginative craftswoman. It has made her capable of performing the ultimate alchemy—transforming something negligible and nondescript into something real. Her ability to create matter out of almost nothing is a violation of an essential tenet of Western rational thought—ex nihilo nihil fit. However, it is only through the violation of this tenet, suggests García Márquez, that creation, or recreation, is possible.

95 There is a long tradition of metaphorical connections between the art of garment manufacture and the process of artistic representation. “The coat as representation and representation as coat,” argues Howard Bloch, “have a long history in the Middle Ages that is evident in both popular and learned traditions” (24). The “tale and the coat,” claims Bloch, “are linked in the assimilation of deceit—trickery, infidelity, lies, hiding—to poetic invention” (27). In No One Writes to the Colonel, the Colonel’s shirt and García Márquez taletelling are linked in the assimilation of necessity to poetic invention.

96 For a more thorough discussion about alchemy and the works García Márquez, see the fourth chapter of this dissertation.
Despite breaching a basic condition of European empiricism, her action is described in exacting empirical terms. The Colonel compares her to a woodpecker, the craftiest of birds—in Spanish, literally, a carpenter bird (“pájaro carpintero”). The stuff she creates is tangible and functional—material in the most literal sense of the word. Her “miraculous” creations are described in great detail (we know their shape, color and purpose). García Márquez emphasizes their concreteness and their reality. However, at the heart of her creation lies utter impoverishment. Her miraculous productions are a revelation of a reality that is barren. Her acute awareness of this barrenness is tied to her ability to make things out of it, impossible as this might seem.

The Colonel in No One Writes to the Colonel, like the Brickmaker in Heart of Darkness, waits rather than making. They wait because they are under the illusion that an external government will provide for them. But this government takes more than it gives, despite its understanding of itself as providential. It does not encourage creation rooted in the land; instead, it effects the separation of dwellers from the land through abstract proclamations and promises. Marlow and the Colonel’s wife respond to the Colonel’s and the Brickmaker’s reliance on illusion by working. Marlow’s work, which shapes his taletelling is likened to manual processes of knitting and weaving. It is an image, in this sense, of Conrad’s own ability to recreate the perplexing violence of the Belgian Empire in writing, an ability informed by his own experience as a sailor. The Colonel’s wife is, herself, an experienced weaver, mender and maker. Her ability to make things in an impoverished world sets her talents apart as especially miraculous. Like Marlow the taleteller, the Colonel’s wife, the weaver, is an image of García Márquez, whose own literary creations enter a world stripped of the usual resources of description and
characterization. Joseph Conrad and García Márquez create literary illusions out of that which ideology and obfuscation have rendered valueless and difficult to see.
Part 3. The Craft of the Ironic Storyteller

Benjamin’s storyteller is a practical, objectively-minded character, closely attuned to the environment that makes his livelihood possible—to the “material” (as writers call it) from which he earns his bread. The novelist, on the other hand, is isolated from people and from their activities. Because he is isolated from people and the context of their heritage, he is solitary and has no counsel to offer them. And because he is shut off from the activities of people, his relation to his subject is no longer that of a craftsman, who necessarily deals with the material of his craft. When Benjamin speaks of the novel, he is referring to a form of literature which is embedded in industrial processes. His comments on the novel are useful as a reflection on the changes wrought by mechanical reproduction upon the literary fabric, not necessarily as sophisticated readings of what the novel can contain and transgress.

Conrad and García Márquez’s deployment of stories and storytelling techniques, and their inclusion of stories in their novels, marks them as a particular breed of storyteller—one that transcends Benjamin’s nostalgic view of the past and his despair of the present. Both authors describe a world in which Benjamin’s ideal storytelling method—a method whereby the process of making and the process of telling are uniquely united—is corrupt but necessary. In the worlds described by Conrad and García Márquez the global spread of capitalism has distorted experience and peoples’ ability to narrate it. But the distortion has not done away with stories; rather, it has led to new ways of telling them. In their hands, the novel becomes a compendium of narrative alternatives, an engine of reinterpretation, revisitation and recreation. These authors self-consciously deploy stories’ particular ability to generate more stories as they are
circulated and transmitted. By including in their novels the processes by which tales are
told and retold, they modify and expand the limits of the written word.

In the case of Conrad, that has led to the creation of a narrator whose stories,
although alienated from processes of making, are still informed by past work
experiences. The ability to tell and to see, acquired through the practice of craft, is, in
turn, what allows Conrad’s narrator (a hybrid novelist and storyteller) to narrate the
deformation of experience as a result of man’s alienated relation to the work of his hands
under the conditions of capitalism. García Márquez seeks to dramatize the process of
creation that takes place in a world whose resources and narrating mechanisms have
been depleted by foreign-led extractive capitalism, civil war and empty governmental
rhetoric and action. Embedded in domestic practices of making (which exist outside of
large-scale capitalistic enterprises) are sorties and storytellers. The stories that come out
of remote and marginalized places have idiosyncratic, rare qualities, which appear
magical but are nevertheless grounded in local experience and ways of knowing. García
Márquez and Conrad therefore appropriate, from a distance, the techniques and
processes used by Benjamin’s ideal storyteller. Yet they use these techniques to breathe
new life into their stories and novels.
Jim’s Homelessness

*Lord Jim* tells the story of a well-meaning young Englishman who fails to find a place in the world. He bears his fate with an effect part-tragic, part-pathetic, but Jim’s homelessness is related ultimately to a simple fact: his inability to find work. His lack of skill, I will argue here, is reflected in his incapacity to adequately interpret the world surrounding him—to master the perceptions and the craft necessary for survival in his particular situation.

The knowledge and experience that come of diligent pursuit of a daily task are known to Marlow but unknown to Jim. The fruits of his labor—including the ability to see the immediate world more sharply—elude Jim: “He had to bear the criticism of men, the exactions of the sea, and the prosaic severity of the daily task that gives bread—but whose only reward is in the perfect love of the work. This reward eluded him” (10; my emphasis). Neither work nor the community of men involved in the collective pursuit of keeping a ship afloat, says Marlow, fascinates Jim.

Jim has a tendency to blame himself for his failures—specifically his act of cowardice in absconding from a ship in distress. The language he uses to describe and understand his failures is anachronistic—*out of use*. Jim’s ideas of heroism, duty and honor are outdated and irrelevant. They are obsolete because they are not born of his experience or daily practice but rather are half-digested echoes of others’ expired experiences. Behind Jim’s superficially romantic illusions lies his craftlessness.97

97 Jim’s “romantic temperament” has been a long-standing subject of critical interest. According to Conrad’s critic and biographer Zdzisław Najder, in “the mind of the English-speaking reader, the word ‘romantic’ may evoke some misleading associations. By no means does it here signify egoism or freakishness, but rather, an exalted sense of responsibility. Jim is a romantic of the same strain as Father Robak, the moral protagonist of Adam Mickiewicz’s great epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz*. They share a like fate” (6). To Tracy Seeley, for “both Conrad and his audience, ‘romance’ suggested the exploits of an exemplary protagonist—who, after heroic...
Marlow, the novel’s narrator, a skilled sailor and raconteur, seems to think Jim’s situation is more complex and more ordinary than Jim does. Marlow’s tale is a disordered collection of his impressions of Jim, an indefinite attempt to understand Jim’s inadequacy through storytelling.

A reading of Jim that focuses on his lack of skill differs from more familiar critical views of him. Jim is not here a picture of a complex modern consciousness afflicted with doubt. He may be a brooding introvert plagued with uncertainty, but he is not quite Hamlet’s descendant. Hamlet’s acute observation of the events unfolding before him heightens his self-doubt and inhibits action. Jim, on the other hand, doubts not because the world around him is inherently uncertain, but because he is uncertain of sailorly protocol. I do not see Jim as an enigma whose actions are capable of exact definition but whose definition will never fit. I see him instead as a character whose situation Marlow tries to describe—not define—through a disconnected amalgam of stories and impressions. My view of Jim is comparatively simple. The point isn’t what he does or feels or even what happens to him, but rather what he lacks.

In search of “an opportunity,” Marlow takes Jim away from Bangkok in his ship. On this “longish passage,” Jim’s incompetence as a sailor becomes apparent. “A seaman” says Marlow,

even if a mere passenger, takes an interest in a ship, and looks at the sea-life around him with the critical enjoyment of a painter, for instance, looking at another man’s work. In every sense of the expression he is “on deck”; but my difficulty, reaps enviable and predictable rewards: fame, glory, retribution, wealth or power—perhaps all of the above. Conrad’s Jim, the novel’s ostensible focus, clearly meets such popular expectations” (498). According to Ian Watt, Conrad’s portrayal of Jim “is skeptical psychologically, because it does not show any very important change in Jim’s character.” Jim’s “naive romanticism, his ingenuous and boy scoutish devotion to the importance of his role, his moody self-preoccupation—all these components of the old Jim are still there on Patusan; all that has changed is that they are no longer disabling” (“The Ending of Lord Jim” 5).
Jim, for the most part, skulked down below as though he had been a stowaway. He infected me so that I avoided speaking on professional matters, such as would suggest themselves naturally to two sailors during a passage. (9)

Jim is not interested in Marlow’s ship, nor in “the sea-life” all around them. He remains aloof toward sailorly practices and parlance, neither “on deck” nor able to discuss the “professional matters” that naturally suggest themselves to “two sailors on passage.”

On his first sea voyage, Jim is “disabled by a falling spar.” Rather than continue to face the dangers of a ship in distress as the engineer does, he confines himself to his cabin: “Jim, disabled by a falling spar at the beginning of a week of which his Scottish captain used to say afterwards, ‘Man! it’s a pairfect meeracle to me how she lived through it!’ spent many days stretched on his back, dazed, battered, hopeless, and tormented as if at the bottom of an abyss of unrest” (11). Jim cannot tell the tale of his failure, because he is ignorant of the skills required to amend it.98

The only sailorly thing that Jim does before abandoning the Patna is to cut loose its lifeboats: “He had intended to cut the lifeboats clear of the ship. He whipped out his knife and went to work slashing as though he had seen nothing, had heard nothing, had known of no one on board” (80). Jim does not cut the lifeboats clear for any practical reason—that is, removing them won’t make the Patna float better. Instead, he does so for imagined reasons. Jim is afraid of what he thinks will happen if the Patna sinks and the lifeboats are still lashed: “His confounded imagination had evoked for him all the horrors of panic, the trampling rush, the pitiful screams, boats swamped—all the appalling incidents of a disaster at sea he had ever heard of” (69). He supposes that getting rid of

98The second engineer is not only a more competent crewmember than Jim; he is also a more talented teller of tales: “The second engineer at the head of the bridge-ladder, kneading with damp palms a dirty sweat-rag, unabashed, continued the tale of his complaints” (19; my emphasis).
the lifeboats will ameliorate the chaos ("boats swamped," "trampling rush") he imagines will take place if the *Patna* sank. He thinks it’s better for his passengers to die quietly than to be saved chaotically. Jim, Marlow suspects, was resigned to “die without added terrors, quietly, in a sort of peaceful trance.” Jim’s romanticized vision of the potentially “appalling incidents of a disaster at sea” interferes with the execution of his sailorly duty.

Jim’s account of the events that led him to abandon the *Patna* vacillates between the delirious and the imaginary, glossing over the technical.\(^99\) When asked by his ship’s engineer to look at his ship’s engine: “Come and help, man! Man! Look there—look,” Jim turns his head (79). Instead of the ship’s engine, he sees a shadowy figure, taking up a third of the sky. “It was black, black,’ pursued Jim with moody steadiness. ‘It had sneaked upon us from behind. The infernal thing!’

Jim’s sightlessness is variously described throughout *Lord Jim*. In Marlow’s words: “Twice, he told me, he shut his eyes in the certitude that the end was upon him already, and twice he had to open them again” (82). Or, (again in the words of Marlow): “He sat with his head sunk on his breast and said ‘Yes,’ without raising his eyes, as if afraid to see writ large on the clear sky of the offing the reproach of his romantic conscience” (253). Or, “then he struck out madly, scattering the mud with his fists. It fell on his head, on his face, over his eyes, into his mouth” (194). And again: “He made efforts, tremendous sobbing, gasping efforts, efforts that seemed to burst his eyeballs in

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\(^99\) In the face of a contemporary, politically charged conundrum (steamboats, religious refugees, a network of global exchange), Jim appeals to the aesthetic dictates of a dead (or dying) literary school. “The conquest of love, honour, men’s confidence—the pride of it, the power of it” claims Marlow, “are fit materials for a heroic tale; only our minds are struck by the externals of such a success, and to Jim’s success there were no externals” (73). Marlow, on the other hand, observes said externals, without being absorbed in them. “My fault of course. One has no business really to get interested. It’s a weakness of mine. His was of another kind. My weakness consists in not having a discriminating eye for the incidental—for the externals—no eye for the hod of the rag-picker or the fine linen of the next man. Next man—that’s it. I have met so many men” (74).
their sockets and make him blind” (195). Jim’s blindness, so to speak, is described vividly and variously in these examples; his eyes are cast down or shut, literally covered with mud, figuratively freed from their sockets. With his vision obstructed, he is unable to render his experience into a story. Because he is a failed hero, he is “afraid” to look at the sky, ashamed to face the words he imagines are “writ large on” it. Since Jim can only think in romantic terms about his abandonment of the Patna (honor, cowardice, danger), he becomes the victim of a particular sort of embarrassment—an embarrassment of heroic proportions that hampers his ability to observe the world and what happens to him with any degree of scrutiny or objectivity.100

Marlow treats Jim’s desperate determination to see, as well as his inability to do so, with unremitting irony. According to Jim, he “shall see that funny sight a good many times yet before...[he]...die[s]” (83). Yet, rather than seeing, Jim does the opposite: “his eyes fell again,” and “twice, at long intervals, filled with vacant staring,” he repeated the phrase: “See and hear...See and hear.” Jim’s words, and their subsequent repetition, are heavy with an irony that must transcend him as a character. It’s unlikely that Jim will see this “funny sight” many more times, considering that he fails to see it the first time around. Moreover, although his eyes are empty (vacant, downcast), he imagines them full (see, see). That he repeats the phrase “see and hear” yet fails to do either suggests that Jim has repressed the sight in question.101

100 For a more thorough account of Jim’s heroic embarrassment, see Greaney 1–14.

101 Jim here exhibits a case of what Freud called the repetition compulsion, or the unconscious pull to return to an earlier state of things. “Once we have substituted a systematic or dynamic repetition for what was merely a descriptive one,” argued Freud, “we can say that the patient’s resistance stems from his ego, and then we immediately realize that the compulsion to repeat is attributable to the unconscious, repressed within him” (85).
“To see and to hear” is also ironic or at least multivalent in terms of diction. See is also “sea,” and hear is also “here.” The here and the sea are precisely what Jim ignores. “He could no longer hear the voices under the awnings. He told me that each time he closed his eyes a flash of thought showed him that crowd of bodies, laid out for death, as plain as daylight” (82). Jim uses his eyes to see what isn’t there rather than what is. He sees many things, but none that are actually “here.” Using puns, Marlow casts himself as the seer, the hearer, the teller (“I did hear. I heard it all...”) and Jim as the romantic—perpetually displaced and prone to illusions.

It is only because experience has sharpened his senses that Marlow ventures to see things that might not be there. “I see well enough now,” he says, “that I hoped for the impossible—for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man’s creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist...—the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct” (41; my emphasis). Marlow uses narration to give events meaning, but not to fix their meaning. Marlow’s continued observation of Jim, rather than calcifying into a final verdict, evolves as the narrative proceeds. Rather than cutting the lines of the lifeboats, as Jim does, Marlow continues to advance the line of his narrative, to offer a reenchanted portrait of Jim’s life.

Jim’s alienated relation to his work is novelistic in many of the senses Benjamin highlights in his storyteller essay. For Benjamin, the novel is essentially homeless—cut off from its forebears and its inheritance: “we owe the most important explication of this aspect of the subject to Georg Lukács, who sees the novel as a ‘form of transcendental homelessness’” (63). The novel, argue Lukács and Benjamin, has been separated from life. Jim, unable to work or to attend to the realities that working demands, is a prosaic

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102 Jim’s difficulty seeing here is a consequence of what Ian Watt has called “the special vulnerability of the imaginative individual” (281).
novelistic character. It is only through Marlow’s storytelling that Jim emerges as a distinctive person, a sui generis anti-hero.

The distance between Jim and the work of his hands begets another sort of distance—a gap between the words he speaks and their ability to grapple with his immediate reality. Jim is terrible at explaining himself to himself. He has trouble recounting actions because he insists on explaining them using terms and images that exist outside them. Rather than dealing with the practical, his words tend towards the transcendental, the potentially heroic.

Aboard Marlow’s ship, right before Marlow’s meeting with Stein, Jim says: “Jove…this is killing work!” (153). It may seem Jim is complaining about shipboard work, but I propose that he is complaining about something broader and more ambiguous. In an important sense, any work is killing, or fatal, to Jim.103 (According to Marlow, Jim is not, in fact, here “alluding to his duties.”) To give Jim work would be to kill his real livelihood as the alienated, homeless protagonist of Marlow’s yarn. Steady work would make him eloquent regarding the terms and subjects of stories, but insufficient for the long-lasting thread and description of a life proper to Conrad’s novels of stories and storytellers.

Jim’s aloofness stands in direct contrast to Marlow’s gregarious storytelling style. Unlike Marlow, Jim does not conceive of stories as a source of outside perspective on his own experience. Instead, he is irked by their very existence. “What dismayed [Jim],” says Marlow, “was to find the nature of his burden as well known to everybody as though he had gone about all that time carrying it on his shoulders” (152). Jim’s disavowal of the...

103 “The novel,” claims Benjamin, “cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond the limit at which it invites the reader to reflect upon the meaning of life with the inscription ‘Finis’ at the bottom of the page” (“The Storyteller” 64).
stories being told about him attests to his inability to participate in the communities that tell these stories. It is also related to his inability to find work in these communities—communities that he passes through but does not join.

Marlow collects local anecdotes and impressions about Jim. In the streets of Bangkok, he notes, Jim was “known as a rolling stone.” Around town and “after a time,” he continues, Jim became “notorious, within the circle of his wanderings” (150). Proverbs (such as a rolling stone gathers no moss9, argues Benjamin, “turn knowledge gained from experience into a wave in the endless, breathing chain of life lessons that come to us from experience” (“On Proverbs” 27). But Jim cannot transmute experience into knowledge. He remains unaware that he is “everywhere known”—a side effect of his imperviousness to stories and to the real words falling from the wagging tongues of the people surrounding him. “It was almost pathetic,” says Marlow, “to see him go about in sunshine hugging his secret, which was known to the very up-country logs on the river” (151).

Stories of Jim circulate freely in the towns where he has alighted. Jim’s Bangkok innkeeper, Schomberg, “a hirsute Alsatian of manly bearing” and an “irrepressible retailer of all the scandalous gossip of the place,” repeats Jim’s tale to anyone willing to listen to it, imparting “an adorned version of the story to any guest who cared to imbibe the knowledge along the more costly liquors” (151). Marlow reproduces verbatim the formulaic conclusion of Schomberg’s tale, while eliding its main content: “‘And, mind you, the nicest fellow you could meet,’ would be his generous conclusion; ‘quite superior.’” Marlow also recounts a separate account of Jim from Siegmund Yucker, “native of Switzerland.” According to Yucker, Jim “for one so young...was of ‘great gabasidy’” (151). Marlow asks Yucker to consider putting Jim on—“Why not send him up country?” I suggested anxiously... ‘If he has capacity, as you say, he will soon get hold
of the work.” Yucker entertains Marlow’s proposal but does not ultimately take it up—
“Es ist ein’ Idee. Es ist ein’ Idee.” To send Jim “up country” would be to perpetuate the
idea of empire that Marlow is skeptical of in *Heart of Darkness*—an idea ostensibly
worthy of sacrifice despite the corruption at its core.

Marlow proves his technical virtuosity as both sailor and storyteller in his almost
naturalistic engineer’s view of the *Patna*’s failing engine: “The durned, compound,
surface-condensing, rotten scrap-heap rattled and banged down there like an old deck-
winch, only more so; and what made him risk his life every night and day that God made
amongst the refuse of a breaking up yard flying sound at fifty-seven revolutions, was
more than he could tell” (20). Marlow’s highly technical, nautical vocabulary (“deck-
winch,” “fifty-seven revolutions,” “scarp-heap”) points to his virtuosity not only as sailor,
but also as a teller of tales, capable of eloquently embodying points of view as disparate
as Jim’s and the engineer’s.

Marlow tells stories to understand Jim’s predilection for grappling “with ghosts”
rather than reality. “To fling away your daily bread so as to get your hands free for a
grapple with a ghost,” says Marlow about Jim, “may be an act of prosaic heroism. Men
had done it before (though we who have lived know full well that it is not the haunted
soul but the hungry body that makes an outcast)” (150). Marlow is reluctant to call Jim’s
struggle heroic. It “may be” an act of heroism, but it isn’t necessarily. Furthermore, if it
*were* heroic, it would be heroism of a prosaic sort, as opposed to the singularity that
characterizes unaffected heroic action. Real acts of heroism, suggests Marlow, are
inevitable and urgent, brought about by actual, unexpected crisis and distress.

For Marlow there is nothing more “enticing, disenchanting, and enslaving” than
life at sea. Yet his sober view is what allows him to see the real wonders of the world:
“There is such magnificent vagueness in the expectations that had driven each of us to
sea, such a glorious indefiniteness, such a beautiful greed of adventures that are their own and only reward. What we get—well, we won’t talk of that; but can one of us restrain a smile?” (99). For Marlow, the work at sea is its own reward. There is no magic beyond the daily reckonings and adventures experienced by competent mariners. The only illusion the sea generates, argues Marlow, is an illusion of reality: “In no other kind of life is the illusion more wide of reality—in no other is the beginning all illusion—the disenchantment more swift—the subjugation more complete” (100).

Jim’s evasion of heroism exists in a suitably unheroic context. His insistence on making himself into a failed hero is futile, since he was never in a situation that required heroism in the first place—all that was needed of him in the Patna was competency, which, unfortunately, he didn’t have. Rather than making up for his incompetence with practice and further exposure, Jim’s self-imagining only spells doom.
Macondo’s Sleeplessness

An extreme version of Jim’s inability to work and experience the world afflicts the citizens of García Márquez’s Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The plague of insomnia brought on by Rebecca, a Guajiro girl who unexpectedly knocks on the door of the Buendía household carrying nothing but a sack full of her dead parents’ bones, culminates in total amnesia. Macondo’s citizens forget even the most fundamental things, up to and including their own names and the names of the objects they live amongst. Most importantly, they lose their ability to tell stories about themselves and others, and the only way to remember or interpret the world left to them is with “labels.”

The system of labels inaugurated by Jose Arcadio Buendía to combat insomnia relies on the written word to specify the name and function of each object. It results in a sort of real-world, rudimentary encyclopedia:

> El letrero que colgó en la cerviz de la vaca era una muestra ejemplar de la forma en que los habitantes de Macondo estaban dispuestos a luchar contra el olvido: *Esta es la vaca, hay que ordeñarla todas las mañanas para que produzca leche y a la leche hay que hervirla para mezclarla con el café y hacer café con leche.* Así continuaron viviendo en una realidad escurridiza, momentáneamente capturada por las palabras, pero que había de fugarse sin remedio cuando olvidaran los valores de la letra escrita. (64)

The sign that he hung on the neck of the cow was an exemplary proof of the way in which the inhabitants of Macondo were prepared to fight against loss of memory: This is the cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk. Thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters. (29)
This basic, yet rigorous, system of identification proves too demanding for Macondo’s citizens. The “reality” they seek to maintain through the written word is too precarious, slipping through their fingers just as it is being established.

José Arcadio’s attempt to order the world through a fixed system of written labels begets further disorder and unknowability. Keeping up with the written word means losing the ability to acquire knowledge in a practical and experiential way—an “inability to experience” which widespread amnesia exacerbates. Knowledge is imparted through labels rather than gained though experience.

Rather than submitting themselves to the potentially verifiable evidence contained in José Arcadio’s labels, Macondo’s citizens fall under the spell of an imagined and magical reality. “Pero el sistema exigía tanta vigilancia y tanta fortaleza moral, que muchos sucumbieron al hechizo de una realidad imaginaria, inventada por ellos mismos, que les resultaba menos práctica pero más reconfortante” ‘But the system demanded so much vigilance and moral strength that many succumbed to the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them but more comforting’ (65; 28; my emphasis). By refusing to abide by José Arcadio’s labels, Macondo’s citizens reappropriate oral and local ways of knowing, seeing and experiencing—a reappropriation which is an image of García Márquez’s own literary inventiveness.

Instead of using the written word as a precise instrument for recording the past, they have recourse to a past that is less systematic but more comforting—a reasonable reaction to the makeshift and corrupt society they have come to associate with the written word. At the insomnia plague’s height Macondo’s citizens ask Pilar Ternera to decipher the past for them using Tarot cards, reading the past as she once read the future. In this fashion they construct a version of their past in language that is dynamic,
imaginative, communally constructed, anecdotal and archetypal rather than systematic, static, foreign, foundational, verifiable and allegedly precise.\textsuperscript{104}

Around this time the story of the capon reappears.\textsuperscript{105} Amid a town-wide affliction of insomnia, retelling the story of the capon becomes a popular pastime.

Se reunían a conversar sin tregua, a repetirse durante horas y horas los mismos chistes, a complicar hasta los límites de la exasperación el cuento del gallo capón, que era un juego infinito en que el narrador preguntaba si querían que les contara el cuento del gallo capón, y cuando contestaban que sí, el narrador decía que no les había pedido que dijeran que sí, sino que si querían que les contara el cuento del gallo capón, y cuando contestaban que no, el narrador decía que no les había pedido que dijeran que no, sino que si querían que les contara el cuento del gallo capón, y cuando se quedaban callados el narrador decía que no les había pedido que se quedaran callados, sino que si querían que les contara el cuento del gallo capón, y nadie podía irse, porque el narrador decía que no les había pedido que se fueran, sino que si querían que les contara el cuento del gallo capón, y así sucesivamente, en un círculo vicioso que se prolongaba por noches enteras. (62)

They would gather together to converse endlessly, to tell over and over for hours on end the same jokes, to complicate to the limits of exasperation the story about the capon, which was an endless game in which the narrator asked if they wanted him to tell them the story about the capon, and when they answered yes, the narrator would say that he had not asked them to say yes, but whether they wanted him to tell them the story about the capon, and when they answered no, the narrator told them that he had not asked them to say no, but whether they wanted him to tell them the story

\textsuperscript{104} In “The Politics of the Possible,” Sangari argues that the history of García Márquez is “a history that forbids (or ought to) either a simple relation to a linear interpretation of the past and that insentiently raises the question of how it is to be known” (159, her emphasis). Pilar Ternera’s reading of the past in the cards is an instance of “historical agency.” Memory, argues Sangari, here “functions as flexible, collective, material practice open to improvisation and personal reminiscence (but not dependent on it) and is different from the kind of memory which is central to the modernism of Eliot and of Proust” (169).

\textsuperscript{105} In this novel García Márquez reuses the Capon story from No One Writes to the Colonel, which I discuss in the first chapter of this dissertation.
about the capon, and when they remained silent the narrator told them that he had not asked them to remain silent but whether they wanted him to tell them the story about the capon, and no one could leave because the narrator would say that he had not asked them to leave but whether they wanted him to tell them the story about the capon, and so on and on in a vicious circle that lasted entire nights. (28-9)

Rather than repeating and memorizing José Arcadio’s labels, the townspeople of Macondo tell the capon story “to the limits of exasperation,” hoping that doing so will put them to sleep. The story of the capon is an emblem of digression, repetition and the incantatory style that stands in for substance throughout One Hundred Years of Solitude.

The plague, which comes from afar, leads to a total severance between language and practice. Macondo’s citizens forget how to live entirely. However, the plague also initiates a ritualistic practice of storytelling. This form of storytelling is monstrous and deformed—it is not related to making but to delaying. The capon story is the repeated expression of a non-story. It never ends but is miraculously referred to in one single run-on sentence. It is reflective of a reality in which people are not allowed to make or experience. They are able to create but these creations remain distorted because separated from the practice of making and transmitting (remembering).

José Arcadio’s labels are an extreme dramatization of the mechanisms that, according to Weber, bring about the disenchantment of the world. In a disenchanted world, all knowledge is potentially attainable. Science has given humans the illusion that everything can be found out. But, in so doing, it has also separated humans from their knowledge. However, in Macondo this attainment of knowledge is doubly theoretical—

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106 The Romantic critic Claudette Kemper Columbus argues that stories like the capon story function like “Gothic stories”—mirrors “held before mirrors, endlessly reflecting” (421).
the acquisition of knowledge through the written word exists in theory but certainly not in practice. This makes Macondo differently disenchanted from Weber’s disenchanted Europe, which did in fact go through a home-grown scientific and industrial revolution that led to widespread literacy in scientific, religious, informational and literary matters.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, it is through the utter disenchantment of the world, proposes García Márquez, that re-enchantment becomes possible. By forgetting everything, up to and including José Arcadio’s labels, Macondo’s citizens are free to reconstruct a world based on their own methods of knowing and seeing, ones intrinsically tied to various shifting local and folkloric practices and reflective of a reality which colonialism and its various offshoots have made slippery, illegible and unwritable.

Conclusion

In Chapter One of this dissertation, following Benjamin and Arendt, I argued that the work of men gives rise to stories and storytellers—to a language that describes the world in correspondence with its actual practices. But the uninterrupted practice of craft is not a given. Work—a quintessentially human impulse—is peculiarly liable to all sorts of disruptions, distortions and deformations. Our distinctive ability to work is exploited, for instance through the forced displacement and enslavement of communities, or capitalized on according to the premises of industrialization or colonization. The deformation of work leads to the deformation of stories. When men become estranged from their work and their land, they can neither see nor hear nor tell it. Estranged populations, it follows, are separated not only from the work of their hands, but also from their language, from their ability to tell stories about the things they see and hear.

Conrad and García Márquez are interested in moments when craft—and, by extension, storytelling—is interrupted. They pay special attention to obstructions and obfuscations that interfere with humans’ ability to see the real and speak about it. They dramatize the linguistic contortions and deformations that emerge when human beings lose the connection between themselves and their work. In these circumstances, the ideas that substantiate global industry, technology and capitalism, such as progress, investment, extraction or accountability, become delusory substitutes for craft—a falsifying substitution which both authors are searching to depict.
Chapter 3. From Something Base Something Great

But there are facts. The worth of the mine—as a mine—is beyond doubt. It shall make us very wealthy. The mere working of it is a matter of technical knowledge, which I have—which ten thousand other men in the world have. But its safety, its continued existence as an enterprise, giving a return to men—to strangers, comparative strangers—who invest money in it, is left altogether in my hands. I have inspired confidence in a man of wealth and position.

-Charles Gould, Nostrum\footnote{Gould may have “technical knowledge” of how a mine should be operated, but this knowledge stands at a remove. Gould presupposes this knowhow, but in fact he has never operated a mine before. The “working of the mine” is hardly working in a mine. The thing “left altogether in” Charles’s “hands” is not a miner’s tool but an abstraction: “safety.” This abstraction also happens to be an obfuscation. The “continued existence” of the mine’s “safety” is, in fact, the perpetuation of violence.}

Just as nature produces metals from Sulphur and Mercury, so too does art.

-Michael Mair, Symbola aureae mensae

In the previous chapters I explored the relationship between craft and storytelling in some of the novels and stories of Conrad and Márquez. These two authors, I argue, are interested not only in how the practice of craft defines and animates particular forms of seeing and of telling, but also in what happens to these forms of seeing and telling when this practice is disrupted. When people are separated from the work of their hands, they become separated not only from the land they inhabit, but also from their ability to see and experience this land and its products. This separation also distances people form their ability to tell stories—stories shaped and informed by craft and the skills and experience that go along with it. This distancing does not mean that storytelling is dying or impossible in the worlds imagined by Conrad and García Márquez. It means that, for...
stories to stay relevant, they must change their shape and their relation to the practices that engender them.

Conrad and García Márquez use and modify stories to mend and describe displaced and disrupted realities. Their stories self-consciously reflect these disruptions formally and thematically. Conrad compiles stories which he embeds in his novels to depict alienated characters and situations. He writes these stories in an ambiance pointedly severed from the context in which the stories are set—making them anew, but different in form and composition. Gabriel García Márquez tells stories about characters whose situation both transcends and precedes homelessness. The worlds they inhabit are destitute and undescribed. By borrowing the tactics of the craft-bound storyteller, García Márquez redescribes and repopulates these worlds. There is something necessarily magical in this act of reanimation and redefinition. García Márquez is able to recreate and redefine unique situations out of utter want—his stories deal with communities whose own processes of making and creating are persistently thwarted, belittled and perversely repurposed. Conrad and García Márquez’s ability to lend substance to what has been deemed insubstantial is, I argue in this chapter, confoundingly alchemical.

The recuperation of manual practices may lead to the restitution of stories and of their distinct ability to interpret the immediate world through frameworks shaped by communal making processes. However, the conditions under which recuperation and restitution are possible are limited, not to say unachievable or unknowable—limitations which both Conrad and García Márquez investigate and defy in their stories and novels.

In this chapter I will explore these writers’ depiction of craft and its relationship to storytelling by focusing on their portrayal of extractive versus creative economies. In particular, I will explore Gould’s silver mine in Conrad’s Nostromo and Melquíades’ alchemical laboratory in García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude.
Neither metal-making—of which alchemy is a subtype—nor the extraction of metal—as in mining—are crafts, strictly speaking. In mining, metals are taken out of the earth’s entrails and shipped elsewhere. They are not reshaped in any significant or interesting way. The essence of mining is separation rather than fusion or regeneration—an image of man’s alienation from the conditions of production and from his dwelling-place. The essence of alchemy, on the other hand, is fusion and recreation. The point of alchemy is to create something unknown, unseen—thus mystifying makers from what they seek to make. Similarly, the processes and methods for attaining this anticipated yet unknown end-product are variable, enigmatic and indefinite—happenstance and contingency are as important as skill or experience.

The stories that emanate from mining or alchemy are obliquely related to the practices that engender them—but in different directions. Gould’s silver mine in Conrad’s Nostromo justifies itself with a series of ideologically laden narratives about profit and progress which are only loosely incorporated into local ways of knowing, saying and governing. These narratives only superficially penetrate the land and its

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109 The “successive gestures of an artisan,” argues Marcel Mauss in A General Theory of Magic (1902), “may be as uniformly regulated as those of a magician” (24). Nevertheless, he continues, “there has always been an intangible difference in method between the two activities.” In craft, “the effects are considered to be produced through a person’s skill. Everyone knows that the results are achieved directly through the co-ordination of action, tool and physical agent. Effect follows on immediately from cause. The results are homogeneous with the means: the javelin flies through the air because it is thrown and food is cooked by means of fire. Moreover, traditional techniques are controllable by experience which is constantly putting the value of technical beliefs to the test” (24–25). If “an activity is both magical and technical at the same time, the magical aspect is the one which fails to live up to this [latter] definition.”

110 In The Gay Science (1882), Nietzsche applauds the aspirational quality of alchemy, which he believes encourages diverse and unanticipated modes of creation and of knowledge acquisition. “Do you really believe that the sciences would ever have originated and grown if the way had not been prepared by magicians, alchemists, astrologers, and witches whose promises and pretensions first had to create a thirst, a hunger, a taste for hidden and forbidden powers? Indeed, infinitely more had to be promised than could ever be fulfilled in order that anything at all might be fulfilled in the realm of knowledge” (185).
costumes—leading to obfuscation and mystification rather than knowledge born of practice.¹¹ Conrad portrays these mystifications in *Nostromo* through a fragmented and multilayered compendium of stories, anecdotes, letters, conversations and official reports. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, alchemy emerges as an idealized and dysfunctional substitute for work. It explores what creation might look like in a world that global capitalism, and its concomitant ideas about progress, profit and civilization, has impoverished and emptied out.¹² But this potentially regenerative view of creation remains unaccomplished—something we may aspire to, like the philosopher’s stone, but something we don’t quite yet know how to bring into being. The effects of the traditional practice of alchemy are *sui generis*. By owning the work of our hands, rather than glorifying extractive practices, these two authors suggest, we lay down the conditions for a world in which making and experimenting are valued more than taking and dislocating.

¹¹ In her article, “The Empty Centre of Conrad’s Nostromo,” Claire Wilkinson observes the impartial penetration of Gould’s enterprise into Costaguana. The “financial structures which seek to exert influence on Costaguanan land, people, and resources” exist without “explicitly asserting a claim to the governance of the country” (6).

¹² The systematic debasement of others’ skills is akin to the instinct of devaluation which Nietzsche defines as “reverse alchemy” in the *Gay Science*. The “preachers of morals,” argues Nietzsche here, “are masters of alchemy in reverse: the devaluation of what is most valuable” (259).
Part 1. Sacrificial Extraction

The Simultaneous Creation and Obliteration of Value

Conrad’s *Nostromo* and García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, describe the implementation of extractive economies in the post-colony. Gould’s silver mine in Costaguana and Mr. Brown’s banana plantation in Macondo are enterprises based on extraction rather than creation or recreation. Their end is abstraction—capital, not craft. The silver extracted from Gould’s mine is labor-intensive, and thus has high exchange-value, but it has no inherent utility; it does not satisfy an essential human need. The bananas extracted from Macondo are also labor-intensive. They are valuable because grown on large-scale, monoculture plantations and harvested by low-wage locals deemed expendable by those who employ and govern them.

Alone in the Great Isabel, one of the islands near the port of Costaguana, Martin Decoud, newspaperman, reformed dilettante and amateur politician, no longer sees the “fascination” of all the silver he has been charged with stockpiling: “for the fascination of all that silver, with its potential power, survived alone outside himself (218).” No longer impressed by the abstract (the “outside” or “potential”) value of silver, Decoud sees the metal without fetishizing it. Silver is not fascinating, but blunt—the epitome of dead weight. Before killing himself with his rifle, Decoud dunks four silver ingots into his pockets so that his cadaver sinks into the sea. “Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of the San Tomé silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things” (219). Silver emerges here as an emblem of nature’s indifference to man instead of man’s ability to extract nature’s riches, also as something that has a use, not merely an exchange value—namely, ballast. Silver is reincorporated into the
natural world rather than extracted and abstracted from it. It is “swallowed up” by the
sea, thrown in the entrails of the earth. It becomes an image of man’s traceless unity with
inanimate nature—a unity which stands in direct contrast to the severing process of
silver extraction and of Decoud’s secessionist politics.\footnote{Decoud, or “the young apostle of Separation,” is a secessionist (438). He is the architect of the plan to
separate Sulaco from the rest of Costaguana—a plan which eventually leads to the creation of the
“progressive” Occidental Republic. Sulaco’s separation from Costaguana is a commentary on the American-led separation of Panama from Colombia in 1903. See Greiff and Greiff 102–104, Benassi 203–215.}

Earlier in the novel, silver also appears denuded—stripped of all extrinsic value:
“Up at the mountain in the strong room of the mine the silver bars were worth less for
his purpose than so much lead, from which at least bullets may be run. Let it come down
to the harbor, ready for shipment” (94). Unless they are shipped, the “silver bars” are
worth less than lead. Silver is only valuable when integrated into a system of global trade
and exchange; otherwise, it is merely heavy. Moreover, Conrad’s insinuation here—that
lead, the material used to make bullets, is the truly valuable element in the Costaguana
mountains—establishes a crucial connection between gun violence and the mining
enterprise.

In \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}, the bananas extracted from Mr. Brown’s plantation
are not used to feed the local populace but traded in for credit. José Arcadio Segundo is
thrown in jail because he reveals the scrip system the United Fruit Company has been
using to finance its fruit freighters, without which “la mercancía de los comisariatos
hubieran tenido que regresar vacíos desde Nueva Orleáns hasta los puertos de embarque
del banano” ‘the commissary merchandise would have to return empty from New
Orleans to the banana ports’ (147; 124). Bananas are taken away, and nothing is brought
back in their stead. Moreover, these bananas are not material that is worked upon—work
which would endow them with “a solidity” extrinsic to them (Arendt 139). They are grown, collected and exported, rather than used to create something else, such as a textile.

As in Nostromo, in One Hundred Years of Solitude the value of the bananas, and the process established by the plantation to commodify the bananas, is linked to violence and death. After the banana massacre instigated by the managers of the banana plantation and carried out by the local military, Jose Arcadio Buendía, one of the massacre’s sole survivors, hides himself in the company train. To his infinite horror, he discovers that he is lying atop rows of dead bodies, instead of banana bunches as he initially thought:

Dispuesto a dormir muchas horas, a salvo del terror y el horror, se acomodó del lado que menos le dolía, y solo entonces descubrió que estaba acostado sobre los muertos. No había espacio libre en el vagón, salvo el corredor central. Debían de haber pasado varias horas después de la masacre, porque los cadáveres tenían la misma temperatura del yeso en otoño, y su misma consistencia de espuma petrificada, y quienes los habían puesto en el vagón tuvieron tiempo de arrumarlos en el orden y el sentido en que se transportaban los racimos de banano. Tratando de fugarse de la pesadilla José Arcadio Segundo se arrastró de un vagón al otro...veía los muertos hombres, los muertos mujeres, los muertos niños que iban a ser arrojados al mar como el banano de rechazo. Era el más largo que había visto nunca, con casi doscientos vagones de carga, y una locomotora en cada extremo y una tercera en el centro. No llevaba ninguna luz, ni siquiera las rojas y verdes lámparas de posición, y se deslizaba a una velocidad nocturna y sigilosa. Encima de los vagones se veían los bultos osuros de los soldados con las ametralladoras emplazadas. (126)

114 In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt argues that solidity in products comes out of the work humans put into shaping them: “Solidity, inherent in all, even the most fragile, things, comes from the material worked upon, but this material itself is not simply given and there, like the fruits of field and trees which we may gather or leave alone without changing the household of nature” (139).
When Jose Arcadio Segundo came to he was lying face up in the darkness. He realized that he was riding on an endless and silent train and that his head was caked with dry blood and that all his bones ached. He felt an intolerable desire to sleep. Prepared to sleep for many hours, safe from the terror and the horror, he made himself comfortable on the side that pained him less, and only then did he discover that he was lying against dead people. There was no free space in the car except for an aisle in the middle. Several hours must have passed since the massacre because the corpses had the same temperature as a plaster in autumn and the same consistency of petrified foam that it had, and those who had put them in the car had had time to pile them up in the same way in which they transported bunches of bananas. Trying to flee from the nightmare, Jose Arcadio Segundo dragged himself from one car to another...he saw the man corpses, woman corpses, child corpses who would be thrown into the sea like rejected bananas... It was the longest one he had ever seen, with almost two hundred freight cars and a locomotive at either end and a third one in the middle. It had no lights, not even the red and green running lights, and it slipped off with a nocturnal and stealthy velocity. On top of the cars there could be seen the dark shapes of the soldiers with their emplaced machine guns.

The cadavers left over from the massacre are staked in the plantation’s train like banana bunches. The dead bodies are discarded according to the protocols initiated by the United Fruit Company to discard “rejected bananas.” The “order” and the “sense” used to treat these dead bodies is thus the “order” and the “sense” decreed by the Company. The soldiers riding atop the train cars “with their emplaced machine guns” also tie the extraction of bananas to the surreptitious propagation of military and paramilitary forms of violence and control.115 That the Company’s death train is travelling in total darkness

115 Different iterations of paramilitary violence have existed in Colombia since the 19th century. During the civil wars of the 19th century (which were an important inspiration for the never-ending wars described in Conrad’s Nostromo), large landholders financed and controlled private armies and mercenaries. Later, in era known simply as La violencia, which lasted from 1948 to 1958 and is fought by Colonel Aureliano Buendia in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the national police armed the peasantry to fight against the liberal party and its associated armed factions, mostly comprised of armed peasants as well. Simultaneously,
is a further reminder that the modus operandi of paramilitary violence is, by definition, hard to interpret or see.\textsuperscript{116}

José Arcadio’s discovery that he is lying atop human bodies rather than banana bunches is gradual. His tardy realization follows a pattern of “delayed decoding” which is characteristically Conradian—a narrative method which Ian Watt identified and defined in his book \textit{Conrad in the Nineteenth Century}.\textsuperscript{117} Marlow’s realization in \textit{Heart of Darkness} that the “round carved balls” surrounding Kurtz’s house are not ornaments but human heads is a characteristic instance of delayed decoding (52). Through this

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conservative landholders across the country (particularly in the sugar plantations of the Cauca Valley) worked alongside the “Pájaros” or “Guerrillas de Paz” to protect their properties from insurgent liberal guerrillas. At the height of the Cold War, the United States helped the Colombian government establish paramilitary forces to fight “international communism”—a phenomenon also described in the banana massacre in \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}. Paramilitarism not only continued after the events described in \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}, but really came into its own between the 1970s and 1990s. In 1978, the government of Julio César Turbay Ayala decreed a statute called “Estatuto de seguridad y defensa de la democracia,” which facilitated the military’s arming of civilians to combat different insurgencies around the country, consequently dragging a large part of the rural citizenry into the civil conflict. In the 1990s, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who later became the country’s president, was instrumental in the formation of paramilitary organizations in Antioquia, where his family held land. Interestingly, as I write this dissertation, Uribe Vélez is, for the first time, in real legal jeopardy for forming paramilitary forces which were more or less public and caused the deaths of thousands of Colombians. See Sanford, Palacios and Ristov.

\textsuperscript{116} Paramilitarism is unofficial. The fact that it remains unacknowledged but operative testifies to its existence outside public view. In \textit{Law in a Lawless Land}, Michael Taussig explores the elusive methods of paramilitary forces in Colombia. Paramilitarism, he argues, is a “strange hybrid” that “drifts into an obscure no-man’s land between the state and civil society.”

\textsuperscript{117} “Delayed decoding” is, according to Ian Watt, a narrative device which “combines the forward temporal progression of the mind as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning” (175). This narrative device “simultaneously enacts the objective and subjective aspects of moments of crisis” (178). The method “reflects all these difficulties in translating perceptions into causal or conceptual terms.” It is a reminder of “the precarious nature of the process of interpretation in general” (179).

The “familiar instance of Ian Watt’s ‘delayed decoding,’” argues Susan Jones, “is only one example of Conrad’s expression of perceptual reality, as he presents the phenomenological relationship of seeing and understanding” (104). According to Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy and Lisa Schneider-Rebozo, instances of delayed decoding in \textit{Heart of Darkness} are “examples of the contingency of all knowing where each conclusion is subject to a revision that depends on a reevaluation of context” (637).
narrative method, Conrad and García Márquez emphasize a fundamental discrepancy between what is expected and what is in fact happening.\textsuperscript{118}

Marlow’s initial impression of what these heads could be is a workman’s impression. When he first sees the heads through a pair of field glasses, he thinks they are artifacts—ornaments \textit{carved} by human hands, “knobs of wood.”\textsuperscript{119} He then realizes that “the round knobs” are not “ornamental but symbolic.” “There was,” he says “nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there” (53). They only “showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.” Kurtz’s display of heads transcends the purpose of his mission in the Congo—the accumulation of ivory.\textsuperscript{120} It is something excessive which

\textsuperscript{118} Marlow and José Arcadio’s delayed realizations dramatize their lack of common cause with the companies employing them—a dramatization of their alternative modes of interpretation, modes both variable and revisionist. According to Arendt, “if the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality” (58). Marlow and José Arcadio’s misplaced perceptions stand against the totalitarian singularizing of experience which is the end result of the capitalist imperialist project. “The end of the common world,” argues Arendt, “has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective” (58).

\textsuperscript{119} It seems significant that Marlow first sees Kurtz’s macabre display of heads through a pair of binoculars. The binoculars seem to reinforce the idea of vision as a gradual process of revision and interpretation. The binoculars are representative of the layered and shifting process through which we perceive and interpret the visible world. They are, in this sense, an image of the “difficulties in translating perceptions into causal or conceptual terms” (Watt 179). The binoculars are a mark not of empiricism but of its opposite.

\textsuperscript{120} Kurtz’s heads, argues Urmila Seshagiri, “do not advance the empire’s historical or anthropological knowledge of the Congo. The heads have no use-value: they neither contribute to the efficiency of the ‘work’ in Africa nor add to the Company’s profits, and they cannot be exported back to Europe” (47).

According to Mark Kinkead-Weekes, “the successive black victims (‘enemies,’ ‘criminals,’ ‘workers,’ ‘rebels’ now) in \textit{Heart of Darkness} get ‘horribly refocused in the decapitated heads on the fenceposts.’ By way of this “refocus,” the “sinister and predatory reality behind the ‘civilizing’ rhetoric gets fully exposed” (32).
eludes language. Kurtz’s ineloquence stems from his own lack of knowledge of what his work in the Congo actually amounts to. The heads are a macabre display of severance and extraction—a show of decapitation for the sake of decapitation.

The Congolese “rebels” in *Heart of Darkness*, like the plantation workers in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, are brutally transposed into disposable people through dismemberment and annihilation. This “method” of treating a company’s labor force is not exactly profit-driven—it hews more closely to the dicta of “economies” of sacrifice and excess. The United Fruit Company’s belief that assassinating its entire labor force and their families is more profitable than giving them Sundays off, is an extreme reenactment of the capitalistic procedures by which the work of people is rendered redundant. A macabre process of value generation is operative in the enterprises

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In *Green Modernism*, the citric Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy notes that “By the time Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo’s economy had exhausted ivory and turned to a very profitable resource that modern industry needed and that literally grew on trees—rubber.” The novel, claims McCarthy, “dramatizes modernity’s destructive alienation from the natural world against the backdrop of the Congo’s ecological collapse” (41).

121 For Georges Bataille, excess is a form of “profitless expenditure.” Bataille’s economy of excess is based not on production and rationality but on waste. Excess is “an expression of human subordination” that haunts man whenever he “seeks to represent himself, no longer as a moment of a homogeneous process—of a necessary and pitiful process—but as a new laceration within a lacerated nature” (80). Through the concept of dépensé, Bataille sought to question the classical view of economics prevalent in 20th Europe, which he found constricting. Interestingly enough, what I am describing here is an economy which becomes excessive through the deformation and displacement of strict notions of profit and productivity.

122 In *The Human Condition*, Arendt illustrates the process by which the capitalistic division of labor renders workers redundant, “qualitatively equivalent,” and unskilled: “Yet, while specialization of work is essentially guided by the finished product itself, whose nature it is to require different skills which then are pooled and organized together, division of labor, on the contrary, presupposes the qualitative equivalence of all single activities for which no special skill is required, and these activities have no end in themselves, but actually represent only certain amounts of labor power which are added together in a purely quantitative way” (123).

Karl Marx argued that the real value behind commodities is the amount of human labor required to produce them: “If then we leave out of consideration the use-value of commodities, they have only one common property left, that of being products of labor” (310). The irony of this idea of value, which Marx identifies in his *Critique of Capitalism*, is that the more that capital grows in disproportion to labor, the more labor
depicted in these two novels—value is created by excessive annihilation, so that destruction is commodified and debauchery turned into richness. By “debauchery” I do not mean the socially acceptable pantomime of extravagant spending and the wanton destruction of crops and unsold goods and fabrics, but the debauchery behind it: the willingness to dispose of a generative labor force through violent means, such as murder or dismemberment, without repercussion.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{123} The ritualistic destruction of wealth has been a common practice in the history of man, evident in human and animal sacrifice, gift-giving and potlatch. But, for the “homo economicus,” destruction of wealth is irrational, even criminal. Potlatch was, for example, made illegal in Canada in 1884 in an amendment to the Indian Act (Bracken 19). The senseless destruction of wealth defies basic tenets of capitalism—the pursuit of profitability, competitiveness and employability. This does not mean that in practice capitalism is free of irrational sacrifice and destruction. Capitalism condones destruction directly—by encouraging practices such as milk-dumping, crop destruction and overproduction—and indirectly—by actively contributing to deforestation, the acidification of the oceans, the degradation of biodiversity and the rampant burning of fossil fuels. For a discussion of exchange systems that are not “profit driven,” and the gift in particular, see Mauss, “The Gift.” For a rejection of the potlatch’s gifts as a sort of “capital investment,” see Barnett 352. For the first ethnographies of potlatch in the 1930s and 40s, see Murdock, Dawson, Curtis and Bataille. For more contemporary readings of the “economies” of sacrifice, see Goux 206–224, Hoeller 131–36 and McAdams 25–46. This footnote itself is a textbook case of excess.
The Managerial Class Unbound

Unlike Benjamin’s storyteller, whose relation to “his material, human life” is “a craftsman’s relationship,” and whose task is “to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way,” Gould and Brown’s relation to human life is managerial (74).

Gould orchestrates the extraction of minerals from the earth without doing any of the extracting himself. Gould oversees the separation of metals from the earth—a process which makes a perverse kind of sense, given that he isn’t earth-bound himself: “The earth,” says Decoud, “is not quite good enough for him” (92). His behavior is symptomatic of “modern world alienation,” which Arendt defines in The Human Condition as man’s “twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self” (6). It is also symptomatic of Max Weber’s “otherworldly asceticism”—the “innermost spring of the new capitalist mentality,” per Arendt—which couches itself not only in the new morality “that grew out of Luther’s and Calvin’s attempts to restore the uncompromising otherworldliness of the Christian faith,” but also “in the expropriation of the peasantry” (251).

The unnamed workers of his mine are charged with the burden of actual, material extraction, and their voices remain unheard throughout the novel (Nostromo is, in that sense, the anti-Germinial). Conrad’s imaginative and multifaceted account of the San Tomé mine tacitly challenges the naturalistic empiricism of Germinal. Conrad seemed to perceive what George Steiner called “the dangers of excessive verisimilitude” (26). The “dissolution of the work of art under the pressures of fact,” argues Steiner, “can best be shown in the critical writings and fiction of Zola.” For Zola, the imagination should not “infringe on the ‘scientific’ principles of naturalism.” Although Conrad is concerned with the precise use of terms and ideas, he does not do “everything in his power” to “give a faithful and ‘objective’ account” of contemporary life in his novels (Zola 12).

As I am writing this dissertation, Jeff Bezos is preparing to travel to space in his New Shepard Rocket under the auspices of his rocket company, Blue Origin, which seeks to promote space tourism for the ultrarich. Other tech billionaires are currently working on similar projects. Bezos also recently invested $100 million in a real-estate tech startup belonging to Colombian ex-president Uribe’s sons (see note 119).
Gould is an alien landholder. The Gould family, writes Conrad, “established in Costaguana for three generations, always went to England for their education and for their wives” (42). Even though his birthplace is Costaguana, Gould remains aloof from local practices and concerns, adopting European models instead: “he had pursued his studies in Belgium and France with the idea of qualifying as a mining engineer. But this scientific aspect of his labors remained vague and imperfect in his mind” (53). Gould’s “imperfect” knowledge makes any correspondence between his mind and his lived reality impossible. His “studies” become something else altogether—the legitimation of his profit-driven, progress-pursuing discourse, which covers up the violence undergirding his enterprise.

Silver is not the end of Charles enterprise; it is, rather, the means—a steady stream of income is what we believe to be its main end: Gould “had been obliged to keep the idea of wealth well to the fore; but he brought it forward as a means, not as an end. Unless the mine was good business it could not be touched. He had to insist on that aspect of the enterprise” (67). The mine’s silver is procured by compulsory labor (which Arendt terms “repetitive”) rather than by work (which is “multiplicative”) (Human Condition 142). Labor is inconclusive. Its end is “not determined by the end product but rather by the exhaustion of labor power” (Arendt 143). Gould’s mine converts human labor into capital: “This stream of silver must be kept flowing north to return in the form of financial backing from the great house of Holroyd” (194). His enterprise results in a commodity that is valuable only “in the form of financial backing.”

To Holroyd, Gould’s North American partner, Costaguana is a set of figures and mathematical abstractions: “Now, what is Costaguana? It is the bottomless pit of 10 per cent loans and other fool investments” (68). But Holroyd’s calculations are neither true nor shrewd. His abstract projections and speculations—“absurd formulas”—lead to a
narrow conception of Costaguana as an “investment” rather than an agglomeration of real, human souls. In his essay “Books,” Conrad writes that “it is in the impartial practice of life, if anywhere, that the promise of perfection for his [the novelist’s] art can be found, rather than in the absurd formulas trying to prescribe this or that particular method of technique or conception” (11; my emphasis). The novelist’s techniques, argues Conrad, are gained by practice, rather than contained in formulas or abstract methodologies.

According to Arendt, the work of “our hands,” as distinguished from “the labor of our bodies,” fabricates “the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice” (136). Holroyd’s formulas miss this “unending variety” unendingly. They apply to a world where fortune can be endlessly accumulated, and where accumulation is predicated more or less contingent on not seeing the hands that bring it into being. As far as he is concerned, his investments result in wealth rather than in any tangible manmade product. Work is conclusive, unlike labor (or, in this case, unlike Holroyd’s limitless investments).

Mr. Brown, in García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, is also an alien landholder, living off the fruits of an extractive economy in the post-colony. He is interested in abstract cyphers and measurements and oblivious to local practices and stories. Unlike the townspeople of Macondo, who grow bananas in their backyards and

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126 In late 1895 Conrad invested in Rorke’s Roodepoort, Ltd, “a gold-mining venture established by Fountain Hope’s former brother, John Rorke” (Stape 110). The property turned out not to be as “first-class” and the deal not as “honest” as Conrad imagined. According to Conrad’s biographer Zdzislaw Najder, Rorke Roodepoort, Ltd “ceased to exist the following year...and the report of the Witwatersrand Chamber of Mines, contains no mention of the company’s mining activities,” leaving Conrad in a “whirl of financial affairs” (213–14).
eat them for pleasure, Mr. Brown eats the bananas “más bien con distracción de sabio que con deleite de buen comedor” ‘more with the distraction of a wise man, than with the delight of a good eater’ (94; 113). He observes the bananas with a clinical eye, “y al terminar el primer racimo suplicó que le llevaran otro. Entonces sacó de la caja de herramientas que siempre llevaba consigo un pequeño estuche de aparatos ópticos” ‘when he finished the first bunch he asked them to bring him another. Then he took a small case with optical instruments out of the toolbox that he always carried with him.’ Brown anatomizes the bananas, scrutinizing them from a distance rather than tasting and sensuously experiencing them.

Mr. Brown uses a set of optical instruments to examine the bananas meticulously. But his tools are not the tools of an artisan. He dissects the banana in order to determine its viability as an object of export, rather than to shape or remold it. “Con la incrédula atención de un comprador de diamantes examinó meticulosamente un banano seccionando sus partes con un estilete especial, pesándolas en un granatorio de farmacéutico y calculando su envergadura con un calibrador de armero.” ‘With the auspicious attention of a diamond merchant he examined the banana meticulously, dissecting it with a special scalpel, weighing the pieces on a pharmacist’s scale, and calculating its breadth with a gunsmith’s calipers.’ His gunsmith’s precision cements the link between his enterprise’s success and the perpetuation of violence.

Unsatisfied with his preliminary analysis of the bananas, Mr. Herbert produces a second bag of instruments which he uses to take measurements of the town’s atmospheric humidity, temperature and light intensity: “Luego sacó de la caja una serie de instrumentos con los cuales midió la temperatura, el grado de humedad de la atmósfera y la intensidad de la luz” ‘Then he took a series of instruments out of the chest with which he measured the temperature, the level of humidity in the atmosphere, and
the intensity of the light. But these highly technical measurements produce data rather than knowledge—the act of measuring or evaluating the terrain and its fruits are signs of Mr. Brown’s theoretical and impersonal methods of “knowing” and of his abstract relation to the land he hopes to plunder.

Mr. Herbert’s exacting measurements arouses a profoundly ambiguous set of responses among the townspeople—Why is the gringo here? What does he want?: “—Miren la vaina que nos hemos buscado —solía decir entonces el coronel Aureliano Buendía—, no más por invitar un gringo a comer guineo” ‘look at the mess we’ve got ourselves into,’ Colonel Aureliano Buendia said at that time, ‘just because we invited a gringo to eat some bananas’ (95; 113). Mr. Brown turns a possible instance of sociability, cultural exchange and delectability into a capitalist venture. Mr. Brown can set up a plantation in a foreign land, not precisely because he has collected information about this land, but because he has taken possession of this land. How he has in fact done this is never revealed in the novel—an elision that dramatizes the obscurity of the actual “methods” behind his enterprise.
**Extraction’s Gaps and Gashes**

Gould and Brown’s extractive enterprises chime with romantic and idealistic discourses. These discourses interfere with locals’ understanding of the companies’ aims and operating procedures. Not only that, they obscure the understanding of the company managers themselves. These gaps in knowledge lead to magical perceptions and interpretations, albeit interpretations born of obfuscation and misprision rather than experimentation.

Gould’s power to interfere with the local landscape attests to the almost godlike distance he can put between himself and the land, his mine and his workers. But this distance also interferes with his ability to see the landscape as anything other than a magical “treasure trove.” Similarly, Mr. Brown’s ability to escape the judicial consequences of his company’s murderous actions in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is repeatedly described as magical.

Throughout *Nostromo*, the Goulds’ determination to make the San Tomé mine operate is described in fantastic terms that obscure their materialistic impulses. “I simply could not have touched it for money alone,” says Charles. The Goulds add layers of idealistic purposes (reparation, vigor, redemption, commitment) to their business. Gould’s actions are powerfully disruptive, in part because they are dislocated and displaced:

Charles Gould sat on the back seat and looked away upon the plain. A multitude of booths made of green boughs, of rushes, of odd pieces of plank eked out with bits of canvas had been erected all over it for the sale of cana, of dulces, of fruit, of cigars. Over little heaps of glowing charcoal Indian women, squatting on mats, cooked food in black earthen pots, and boiled the water for the mate gourds, which they offered in soft, caressing voices to the country people. A racecourse had been staked out for the vaqueros; and away to the left, from where the crowd
was massed thickly about a huge temporary erection, like a circus tent of wood with a conical grass roof, came the resonant twanging of harp strings, the sharp ping of guitars, with the grave drumming throb of an Indian gombo pulsating steadily through the shrill choruses of the dancers. Charles Gould said presently—“All this piece of land belongs now to the Railway Company. There will be no more popular feasts held here.” (109)

From the back seat of his carriage, Gould stares out at the plain and its dwellers. His detached relation to the land he looks over stands in direct opposition to the people’s. Their sustenance, unlike his, depends on their ability to work the land they inhabit. They depend on the earth for food (“black earthen pots”) and goods (tobacco, “mate gourds,” “caña”); for shelter and commerce (“booths made of green boughs,” tents “of wood” with “conical grass” roofs); and for art and entertainment (“the resonant twanging of harp strings”).

The “country people” described in this passage do not seem estranged from the land, but will be from the moment Gould makes it the Company’s (“All this piece of land here belongs now to the Railway Company. There will be no more popular feasts held here”). Gould’s quasi-Protestant work ethic and calculations of the mine’s “production processes” provide moral grounds for separating the “country people” from their country—that is, from the material conditions of their labor: “A vague idea of rehabilitation had entered the plan of [the Goulds’] life. That it was so vague as to elude the support of argument made it only the stronger...It was as if they had been morally bound to make good their vigorous view of life” (66).127

127 In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber argues that Calvinism lent action a distinctly moral valence, which led to a connected and rationalized “system of life” that transformed man from status naturae to status gratia (62). Rational forms of Christian asceticism, claims Weber, led to the development of a “systematic method of rational conduct with the purpose of overcoming the status naturae, to free man form the power of irrational impulses and his dependence on the world and on nature.” Asceticism “attempted to subject man to the supremacy of a purposeful will, to bring his actions under constant self-
In Part One, Chapter 8, as he is riding towards his mine, Gould fantasizes about his mounting profits in language that conceals his crude materialism and his vulgar utilitarianism beneath an idealistic carapace.

To Charles Gould’s fancy it seems that the sound must reach the uttermost limits of the province. Riding at night towards the mine, it would meet him at the edge of a little wood just beyond Rincón. There was no mistaking the growling mutter of the mountain pouring its stream of treasure under the stamps; and it came to his heart with the peculiar force of a proclamation thundered forth over the land and the marvelousness of an accomplished fact fulfilling an audacious desire (93).

The setting of Gould’s ambition puts readers in mind of the *locus amoenus* of a romance: a “little wood just beyond Rincón,” a “mountain pouring its stream.” Phrases such as “came to his heart,” “fulfilling an *audacious* desire” and words like “treasure,” “marvelousness,” and “fancy” give Gould’s enterprise chivalric qualities. Yet other phrases, such as “proclamation thundered” and “accomplished fact,” transport us from the realm of biblical rhetoric. The commingling of these two registers—pastoral-

control with a careful consideration of their ethical consequences” (71). The “moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole.” Calvinism added to these ideas of self-control, “the idea of the necessity of proving one’s faith in worldly activity” (72). The God of Calvinism, argues Weber, “demanded of his believers, not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system” (70). For a discussion of Weber’s “rationalization” or disenchantment of the world, see the first chapter of this dissertation, “Theoretical Underpinnings.”

128 In *Nostromo*, Conrad thematizes the emergence of his modern, epic novel through the incorporation of conventional romance ingredients, which he then distorts. Conrad’s enchanted gardens seem initially to be replicas of the gardens of Boiardo and Ariosto, but eventually mutate into something else. On the incorporation of and eventual departure from the functions and matters of romance by other authors, see Quint 77–91 and Javitch 515–27.

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, “Progress Romanced” I will delve into Conrad and García Márquez’s use of elements of romance to depict the marvelous realistically. These two authors, I will argue, use the language of romance to depict, instead of obfuscating, the real.
romantic and messianic—is evident in formulations such as “the marvelousness of an accomplished fact.” It highlights Gould’s perverse formulation of his materialistic ambitions as providential, as well his ideals’ distance from the real.

The “growling mutter of the mountain” reminds Gould of the first time he laid eyes on it and the gorge beneath it, “that far off evening when his wife and himself, after a tortuous ride through a strip of forest...had gazed for the first time upon the jungle-grown solitude of the gorge” (93). The gorge seemed then to be a paradise untrammelled by man, “jungle-grown.” Before Gould’s eyes “the thread of a slender waterfall flashed bright and glassy through the dark green of the heavy fronds of tree-ferns.” But Don Pepe—the old Costaguana mayor—is less convinced of the setting’s untaintedness: “Don Pepe, in attendance, rode up, and stretching his arm up the gorge, had declared with a mock solemnity, ‘Behold the very paradise of snakes, señora.’”

We soon discover that this locus amoenus is a marvelous treasure trove in Gould’s estimation only: “The waterfall existed no longer. The tree-ferns that had luxuriated in its spray had dried around the dried-up pool, and the high ravine was only a big trench half-filled up with the refuse of excavations and tailings” (93). That Gould can still see this ravaged landscape as an ideal setting shows how severely his understanding of his enterprise distorts reality. “Businessmen” such as Gould, claims the narrator, “are frequently as sanguine and imaginative as lovers” (63). The pristine

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129 Conrad’s commingling of genres is reminiscent of the players’ multivalent repertoire in Hamlet: “The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, / comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, / historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical- / comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or / poem unlimited” (2.2.278-80). It’s worth remembering here that Conrad had read all of Shakespeare by the age of 23. Shakespeare was Conrad’s great English teacher.

130 Mr. Holryod is, according to Martin Decoud, another sentimentalist who suffuses crude material facts with idealism: “But then there was that other sentimentalist, who attached a strangely idealistic meaning to concrete facts” (203).
waterfall, we learn, exists only in the mind of Mr. Gould, or “preserved in Mrs. Gould’s water-color sketch.” In other respects, it is a desiccated gorge scarred by the mine—a crude and realistic image of the “sordid process of extracting the metal from under the ground” (48).

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the interventions of the United Fruit caravan into local life are decisive. These interventions cast the workings of the company in an almost magical light—an indication of the company’s alienated relation to the land where it operates and the people it employs. In one respect, the townspeople are impressed by the company as if by a godly magician: “Dotados de recursos que en otra época estuvieron reservados a la Divina Providencia, modificaron el régimen de lluvias, apresuraron el ciclo de las cosechas, y quitaron el río de donde estuvo siempre” ‘Endowed with means that had been reserved for Divine Providence in former times, they changed the pattern of the rains, accelerated the cycle of harvest, and moved the river from where it had always been’ (94; 113). The company is “endowed with means” hitherto unknown, let alone handled by the people of Macondo. The company’s ability to use these means to transform the local landscape, to change the river’s course, is nothing short of magical and providential to those witnessing the transformation.

Mr. Brown’s lawyers again and again deflect the workers’ complaints about the inequities of the United Fruit Company. The lawyers discredit the workers’ words in arbitration sessions that seem equally magical. “Los decrépitos abogados vestidos de negro que en otro tiempo asediaron al coronel Aureliano Buendía, y que entonces eran apoderados de la compañía bananera, desvirtuaban estos cargos con arbitrios que parecían cosa de magia” ‘The decrepit lawyers dressed in black who during other times had besieged Colonel Aureliano Buendía and who now were controlled by the banana
company dismissed those demands with decisions that seemed like *acts of magic*’ (123; 147; my emphasis). As readers, we might be inclined to see these dismissals more as inarticulate machinations of power and brute force than “magical” acts.\(^{131}\)

When Mr. Brown receives a written notice of the workers’ demands, he responds with one of the classic tricks in the magical repertoire: namely, a disappearing act: “Tan pronto como conoció el acuerdo, el señor Brown enganchó en el tren su suntuoso vagón de vidrio, y desapareció de Macondo junto con los representantes más conocidos de su empresa” ‘As soon as he found out about the agreement Mr. Brown hitched his luxurious glassed-in coach to the train and disappeared from Macondo along with the more prominent representatives of his company’ (124; 147). After continued attempts to track him down, Mr. Brown is finally found. This time he escapes his pursuers not by disappearing in a “glassed-in coach,” but by an act of camouflage—the culminating point of mimetic concealment:

\(^{131}\) The company’s lawyers deflect its workers’ claims through legal means. They use “legality” to cover up for illegality. The narrator compares this perverse manipulation of language to a sort of illusionism. “Fue allí donde los ilusionistas del derecho demostraron que las reclamaciones carecían de toda validez, simplemente porque la compañía bananera no tenía, ni había tenido nunca ni tendría jamás trabajadores a su servicio, sino que los reclutaba ocasionalmente y con carácter temporal” ‘It was there that the sleight-of-hand lawyers proved that the demands lacked all validity for the simple reason that the banana company did not have, never had had, and never would have any workers in its service because they were all hired on a temporary and occasional basis’ (123; 148). This is a successfully magical and violent word trick—the extermination of the workers is justified ex post facto by a one-sided speech act. Before the workers are massacred by local armed forces following the orders of the United Fruit Company, they are declared nonexistent by the Supreme Court: “se estableció por fallo de tribunal y se proclamó en bandos solemnes la inexistencia de los trabajadores” ‘by a decision of the court it was established and set down in solemn decrees that the workers did not exist.’ This is an act of magic that works purely rhetorically—the making of one thing into another through a mere re-designation, despite its legal and official procedures and pretensions. As the novel progresses, the massacre is forgotten by everyone except José Arcadio Segundo. Officials insist that José Arcadio’s memories are nothing but a dream, that Macondo has always been and will always be a happy place. At the same time, they surreptitiously assassinate all remaining witnesses. “‘Seguro que fue un sueño’, insistían los oficiales. – En Macondo no ha pasado nada, ni está pasando ni pasará nunca. Este es un pueblo feliz. – Así consumaron el exterminio de los jefes sindicales” ‘You must have been dreaming,” the officers insisted. ‘Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town.’ In that way they were finally able to wipe out the union leaders’ (128; 151).
Al día siguiente compareció ante los jueces con el pelo pintado de negro y hablando un castellano sin tropiezos. Los abogados demostraron que no era el señor Jack Brown, superintendente de la compañía bananera y nacido en Prattville, Alabama, sino un inofensivo vendedor de plantas medicinales, nacido en Macondo y allí mismo bautizado con el nombre de Dagoberto Fonseca. (124)

On the following day he appeared before the judges with his hair dyed black and speaking flawless Spanish. The lawyers showed that the man was not Mr. Jack Brown, the superintendent of the banana company, born in Prattville Alabama, but a harmless vendor of medicinal plants, born in Macondo and baptized there with the name of Dagoberto Fonseca. (147)

The central government in One Hundred Years of Solitude denies its mass assassination of liberal leaders throughout the nation, promising “una investigación terminante del episodio sangriento” ‘a complete investigation of the bloody episode’ (102). But, “la verdad no se esclareció nunca” ‘the truth never came to light,’ (83; 102). There is no finality and no discovery.

Mr. Brown, unmasked, is no longer the exotic maker of measurements he was when we first encountered him, but the parody of an everyday citizen of Macondo—a vendor of medicinal plants. His dogmatic rationalism has fallen prey to a particularly acute form of local ingenuity that works against magic.132 The “unmasking” of the huckster in Macondo is the revelation of yet another mask, and of masking itself as a device or method.133

There is no conclusive judgement, verdict or sentencing, simply the lingering realization

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132 In his article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” Caillois defines mimicry as “an incantation fixed at its culminating point and having caught the sorcerer in his own trap” (69; my emphasis).

133 In a letter to Edward Garnett in 1896, Conrad wrote “one’s own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown.”
that, ultimately, the magician has no better understanding of why his magic succeeds than the people duped by it.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ In Conrad’s fiction, writes Lloyd Fernando in his article “Conrad’s Eastern Expatriates” “we have, in brief, an evocation of the true colonial condition which deflects from familiar roles the occupied and the occupiers alike” (81).
Displacement and Parody

The Goulds and the Browns believe their highly specific and historically conditioned ideas are applicable to Costaguana and Macondo because they believe these ideas are objective and universally beneficent. However, their schemes, founded on allegedly universal ideals, benefit their disseminators only. The customary content of their supposedly scientific, pragmatic and universal ideas does not necessarily hold water on foreign soil. Their enterprises are efficacious not because of what they claim to be, but because of how they are implemented. In this sense, they appear more like enchantments than policies—they work, but the actual reasons they work remain unacknowledged. In the eyes of Costaguana’s villagers, Gould’s enterprise is mysterious and worthy of reverence.135 What the Gringo plantation is “looking for” is, to the people of Macondo, unknown.

In Conrad’s *Nostromo*, the mayor of the town of Rincón, “a skinny Moreno,” thinks Gould a “mysterious and official” person. This is enough to convince the mayor that Gould holds influence over other mysterious and official matters, small and large, such as his pension and the workings of the “Gobierno supreme.”136 “he asked Charles Gould (whom he took for a mysterious and official person) to do for him was to remind the supreme Government – El Gobierno supremo – of a pension (amounting to about a dollar a month) to which he believed himself entitled” (93). The alcalde’s reasoning is,

135 The baffling broadness of his operation—which ranges from landholding, to news reporting, to security-enforcing, to the extraction of silver by mining —partly accounts for his enterprise’s mystery and ambiguity.

136 The figure of the government official awaiting his pension from the central government presages García Márquez’s unpaid colonel in *No One Writes to the Colonel*, which I discuss in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
Like magic, mimetic rather than causal.\textsuperscript{137} Neither institutional practices nor state rhetoric can explain to the mayor why the “Gobierno supreme” does or doesn’t do the things it claims to—predictions about its behavior is impossible. Since the “official” operates mysteriously rather than methodically, the mayor’s approach to it cannot but be parodic.

Unlike the mayor of Rincón, the Goulds discern no link between the language they speak and the language of the local government. This lack of self-knowledge makes their enterprise perverse and pernicious. It denies its function—the extraction and exportation of local resources through expropriation, indentured servitude and mercenaries. Mrs. Gould, for example, notices Costaguana’s government’s parodic grandiloquence, but fails to notice how closely it echoes her own:

> stories of political outrage; friends, relatives ruined, imprisoned, killed in the battles of senseless civil wars, barbarously executed in ferocious proscriptions, as though the government of the country had been a struggle of lust between bands of absurd devils let loose upon the land with sabres and uniforms and grandiloquent phrases. And on all the lips she found a weary desire for peace, the dread of officialdom with its nightmarish parody of administration without law, without security, and without justice. (78)

\textsuperscript{137} Mimetic magic—the idea that one thing can influence another because it resembles it—was famously theorized by George Frazer in \textit{The Golden Bough} (1890). According to Frazer, man abandoned magic when he saw that “he had taken for causes what were not causes” (59). (How seriously these causes were taken to be causes by those who, according to Frazer, considered them causes, remains a topic of discussion among anthropologists.) “The shrewder intelligences must in time have come to perceive that magical ceremonies and incantations did not really effect the results which they were designed to produce, and which the majority of their simpler fellows still believed that they did actually produce.” That magic is not deductive, does not, however, make it ineffectual. The “effects” which man strove “hard to produce” did “manifest themselves”—they “were still produced,” adds Frazer shrewdly, just “not by him.” “The reader may well be tempted to ask,” continues Frazer, “How could they continue to cherish expectations that were invariably doomed to disappointment? With what heart persist in playing venerable antics that led to nothing, and mumbling solemn balderdash that remained without effect? Why cling to beliefs which were so flatly contradicted by experience?”
The Goulds, like the Ribierists and Monterists, justify their political and economic maneuvering in Costaguana in grandiose terms; in the words of Charles Gould, “The air of the New World seems favorable to the art of declamation” (74). Costaguana’s ruling families use a language which in its foreignness is obscurantist, concealing the true nature of their actions and intentions from themselves and from others. “The outside world,” says Nostromo’s narrator of Mr. Gould, “was at liberty to wonder respectfully at the hidden meaning of his actions” (71). This obscurantist language covers up the real mechanism by which decisions in Costaguana are enforced—paralegal violence.

The grand phrases of Nostromo’s Europeans are efficacious not because they are grand, but because they are backed by the power of mercenaries and Winchester rifles. In a conversation with Don Pepe, Mrs. Gould complains about the local government’s “lawlessness.” Had it been less lawless, she claims, there would have been fewer bandits and more honest workers in the province: “If it had not been for the lawless tyranny of your Government Don Pepe, many an outlaw would be living peaceably and happy by the honest work of his hands” (96; my emphasis). Mrs. Gould’s idea of what counts as the “honest work of his hands” is an idiosyncratic one, to say the least. The handiwork required of her miners is monotonously extractive and has nothing creative or artisanal about it.

Don Pepe assuages Mrs. Gould’s fears by telling her that such lawlessness will no longer be tolerated under the aegis of the Gould Concession: “No wonder there are bandits in the Campo when there are none but thieves, swindlers, and sanguinary macaques to rule us in Santa Marta. However, all the same, a bandit is a bandit, and we shall have a dozen good straight Winchesters to ride with the silver down to Sulaco” (97).
But here we must question the boundary between the quasi-legal and the illegal.\textsuperscript{138} Isn’t scaring off bandits with Winchester rifles to protect the silver coming down from the mine another form of lawlessness? The narrative will go on to answer this question in the affirmative.\textsuperscript{139} The mercenary rule under the Capataz Nostromo protects the interests of the mine concession in the name of the people.

The narrator of \textit{Nostromo} is less oblivious to the actual function of the \textit{imeperium in imperio} that is the Gould Concession. “Every three months,” he says, “an increasing stream of treasure swept through the streets of Sulaco on its way to the strong room in the O.S.N. Company’s building by the harbor, there to await shipment for the north” (101). The San Tomé silver escort, described in Part One, chapter eight, is an example of the level of violence and quasi-legal machinery required to move San Tomé’s silver from the mine into the hands of its northern financial backers. “The sleepy people in the little clusters of huts, in the small \textit{ranchos} near the road,” says the narrator, “recognized by the headlong sound the charge of the San Tomé Silver escort toward the crumbling wall of the city on the Campo side. They came to the door to see it dash by over ruts and stones, with a clatter and a clank and cracking of whips, with the reckless rush and precise driving of a filed battery hurrying into action” (100). The clanking wheels of the silver escort (slashing whips, clattering carts, yelling administrators) is

\textsuperscript{138} In his book \textit{City of Suspects}, the Mexican historian Pablo Picatto traces the apparition of the term “ratero” in early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mexico to criminalize a segment of the population that detached from the country’s official economy. “In order to systematically eradicate rateros, turn-of-the-century Mexican criminologists had to construct them as a collectivity” (164). In a city “marked by clear, if unstable, social divisions the category of \textit{ratero} offered people a useful way to talk about those strangers” (167).

\textsuperscript{139} In his novels, argues Lloyd, “Conrad sometimes refers to the “lawlessness of the area or of particular characters. He does not mean by this mere criminality but, quite literally, a condition where the true laws are hard to discover if they exist at all” (82).
directly opposed to the somnolence of the local villagers, who watch this parade of extracted riches in awe.

The operations of the United Fruit Company in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are also hidden under layers of parody and idealism, of seeming order and meritocracy. The moment the company arrives in Macondo, writes García Márquez, the “funcionarios locales” ‘local functionaries’ are replaced with “forrasteros autoritarios” ‘dictatorial foreigners’ and the old policemen with “sicarios de machetes” ‘assassins with machetes’ (98; 118). The United Fruit Company’s success in Macondo hinges on its unofficial co-optation of local forms of governance and surveillance—a process which delegitimizes local forms of governance and economics. Mr. Brown takes the “dictatorial foreigners” to live with him in a “gallinero electrificado” ‘an electrified cockpit,’ not out of self-interest, but because it is, he explains, their prerogative: “para que gozaran, según explicó, de la dignidad que correspondía a su investidura, y no padecieran el calor y los mosquitos y las incontables incomodidades y privaciones del pueblo” ‘so that they could enjoy, as he explained it, the dignity that their status warranted and so that they would not suffer from the heat and the mosquitoes and the countless discomforts and privations of the town’ (99; 119). Mr. Brown and his men warrant their appropriation of local land and militarized occupation of this land to an inherent dignity, rather than to their unofficial monopoly on violence and politics. *Sicarismo* is instrumental to the Company’s ability to accumulate capital and to take possession of land, though the Company never says so.140

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140 In the book *No nacimos pa semilla*, Colombian author Alonso Salzar analyzes the emergence of sicarismo in Colombia. According to Salazar, the sicario is the embodiment of excess consumerism. “El sicario lleva la sociedad de consumo al extremo: convierta la vida, la propia y la de las víctimas, en objetos de transacción
Because of the crucial gap between ostensible and actual methods, the company's institutions cannot help being parodic—displays of benevolence and technical know-how which correspond to the company's romantic and obfuscatory idea of what it is doing in Macondo rather than what it actually does. The Company engineers do not build latrines but import them. "Los ingenieros, en vez de construir letrinas, llevaban a los campamentos, por Navidad, un excusado portátil para cada cincuenta personas, y hacían demostraciones públicas de cómo utilizarlos para que duraran más" ‘The engineers, instead of putting in toilets, had a portable latrine for every fifty people brought to the camps at Christmas time and they held public demonstrations of how to use them so that they would last longer’ (124; 146). Rather than making or teaching how to make, the Company covers up its own meanness and ineptitude with useless demonstrations of “proper care” or “use” of Company property. The company doctors do not examine the sick, but instead ‘los hacían pararse en fila india frente a los dispensarios, y una enfermera les ponía en la lengua una píldora del color del piedralipe, así tuvieran paludismo, blenorragia o estreñimiento” ‘had them line up behind one another in the dispensaries and a nurse would put a pill the color of copper sulfate on their tongues, whether they had malaria, gonorrhea, or constipation” (124; 147). The Company doctors’ approach to sickness is more processional than diagnostic—a profane and nonsensical version of a Catholic communion.141 The pills delivered by the company nurses are económica, en objectos desechables” ‘The sicario takes the social practice of consumption to its extreme: he turns livelihood, his own and that of his victims, into an economic transaction, into a disposable object’ (200; my translation). The figure of the sicario—an assassin illegally hired to kill targeted people—has become a staple of contemporary Colombian literature. For a more in-depth exploration of sicarios and their role in Colombian literature, see Mutis 207–26, von der Walde 27–40 and Abad Faciolince 202–17.

141 In “The Image of Africa,” Achebe makes a mockery of the good intentions with which European do-gooders build hospitals for natives. Albert Schweitzer, the “extraordinary missionary” who “sacrificed a brilliant career in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans” built, in much the same
repurposed by the town’s children as markers for keeping track of winning lottery numbers—effectively making the pills instruments of games of chance instead of parodic displays of healthcare or divine benevolence.

The Goulds’ and the Browns’ extractive endeavors are foreign importations and implementations, which focus on extracting rather than making. Their discourses—foreign and mysterious—are efficacious not because of their particular and varying content, but because of their similar and generalizable form and function—grandiose decontextualized words, mysteriously used by local and foreign elites to justify their usurpation of local resources. Causal logic cannot explain why these discourses do or don’t work. Instead, it is their parodic element (their putative “progressiveness” or “empiricism”) that lends them power, as it obfuscates the real reasons behind their efficacy—the monopoly on violence and of resources.

area that Conrad writes about in Heart of Darkness, “a hospital appropriate for his junior brothers with standard of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of diseases came into being.” It was also Schweitzer who said: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother.” Although I agree with Achebe that Joseph Conrad was an ambivalent racist—his racism was of a different order than Schweitzer’s—Conrad would never have agreed to build something in the name of fraternity or altruism.
Part 2. Preliminary Notes on Alchemy

No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.

-Lord Jim

This section offers a brief survey of alchemical inventions, lore and practice. This technical detour is necessary to substantiate the claim I will make in the section that follows, which is: García Márquez and Conrad advance alchemical methods and procedures as possible alternatives to industrial modernism and its economies.

Alchemy is a practice which requires profound technical knowledge of complex procedures, while also remaining open to the magical and the marvelous. The alchemist

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142 According to Mauss, when the alchemists say ‘nature triumphs over nature’ (or like acts on like) they mean “that there are objects which have a relationship of such close dependence that they are fatally attracted to each other.” It is from this point of view, continues Mauss “that the nature of the destructive element is to be envisaged” (General Theory of Magic 92; my emphasis).

143 García Márquez’s interest in alchemy as a creative process is evident in One Hundred Years of Solitude, as I will later show in this chapter. There is, on the other hand, limited evidence of Conrad’s own interest. Notwithstanding, I have come across a few possible direct and indirect allusions to alchemy in Conrad’s works and letters. The Arrow of Gold (1919), for example, contains a brief description of an alchemical process of transmutation. The narrator of the novel praises Doña Rita by comparing her to an alchemist: “you transmute the commonest traits into gold of your own” (120). Conrad’s overall interest in gold, mirrors, shadows and doubling is reminiscent of alchemical processes and procedures. The title of his autobiography, The Mirror of the Sea (1906), could be hinting to Roger Bacon’s alchemical manual, The Mirror of Alchemy (1597). In a letter to Clement Shorter, Conrad admits to having signed by mistake two copies of the Dover Patrol for “Ad. Sir Roger Bacon” rather than Reginald Bacon. (Collected Letters vol. 7 224). Conrad’s name de plume, could be a possible allusion to the 18th century alchemist Johan Conrad Dipple. Conrad Dipple was a renowned alchemist and anatomist. He invented a rejuvenating essence called Dipple Oil and experimented with “soul-transferring.” Dipple was born and lived for many years at Castle Frankenstein. There are rumors that Conrad Dipple—who signed his letters with the name Franckensteinensis, inspired Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein. But this remains largely unproven. Lastly, Conrad’s insistence that nature is essentially an indifferent and undifferentiated mass—a mass which skilled practitioners may only momentarily interpret—is too, reminiscent of alchemical thought and praxis. In a letter to Cunninghame Graham in 1898, Conrad wrote, “There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us in a world that whether seen in a convex or concave mirror is always but a vain and fleeting appearance” (Conrad’s Letters to R.C.G. 71).
is both a practical worker and dreamer. The point of alchemy is to transform the commonplace into the precious through quasi-methodical experimentation and manipulation—it is an intrinsically recreative and revaluating practice. Alchemists accumulated useful facts by “working hard among sensible experience” (Muir 53). The practical pursuit of the irrational results in a particular sort of knowledge which is physicalist, demystifying and also polysemic—strange and serious, technical and mysterious. Alchemy’s reliance on manipulation, experimentation and recreation sets it apart from the ethic of extraction and calculated profit.

In layman’s terms, alchemy is the conversion of base metals into gold. However, this conversion was understood quite broadly by alchemists from the classical to the early modern period. Transmutation—the characteristic process of alchemy—was conceived of in various ways. These conceptualizations were more eclectic, more complex and more metaphysically inflected than the notion of simply converting base metals into gold. By altering the qualities, composition and components of metals through admixture, alchemists believed they could make metals out of other metals.

144 Alchemists, writes Marcel Mauss in his A General Theory of Magic, did not confine themselves to the field of abstract considerations and it is in this fact which proves to us that these ideas really worked in magic (91).

145 The alchemist’s audience, writes Pereira, “was always diverse.” As described in the prologue to the Latin Semire recta, it consisted of “the very rich, the learned, abbots, priests, canons, physicians as well as the unlearned.” See Pereira, 338.

146 In “Alchemy and Alchemists,” John Read argues that alchemy was the chemistry of the Middle Ages but also, “in its broadest aspect,” a “system of philosophy which claimed to penetrate the mystery of life as well as the formation of inanimate substances.” Alchemy “was thus a complex and indefinite mixture of chemistry, astrology, philosophy, occultism, magic and other ingredients” (251). A recent critical shift from idea to praxis in the study of the history of alchemy has emphasized alchemy’s breadth. Recent studies, argues Tara Nummedal in “Words and Works in the History of Alchemy,” have highlighted the “diversity of the ways that early modern Europeans engaged alchemy, ranging from the literary to the entrepreneurial and artisanal, as well as the broad range of social and cultural spaces that alchemists inhabited” (330).
Alchemy is a multiplicative and cohesive process—both technical and manual, empirical and mystical. Unlike mining, which extracts metals to dislocate them, alchemy fuses metals together in order to recreate metals.

Alchemy, writes Stanton Linden, could “at once display both exoteric and esoteric tendencies as the process for perfecting base metals was applied to the sinfully corrupt psyche of man” (5). From the early Roman period until the early modern period, as propounded by alchemists such as Mary the Jewess, Zosimus of Panopolis, Cleopatra the Alchemist and Roger Bacon, alchemy was the study of the science of changes in matter and substance. These changes could be chemical, physiological (passing from sickness to health), temporal (old age transformed into youth), or metaphysical (passing from an earthly to a supernatural state of being). This eclecticism is characteristic of alchemy.

Remarkably, the study and practice of alchemy survived into the high scientific period of the 16th and 17th centuries: Isaac Newton, Tycho Brahe and Robert Boyle, among others, were all practicing alchemists. That is, alchemy spanned the periods in

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147 Mary, also called Maria, was one of the earliest alchemical authors. In the third century, “she was known to Zosimus, who identified her with Mary, sister of Moses” (Taylor 116). Her works “can hardly be later that the first century A.D.” However, “they survive only in quotations.” She was one of the most remarkable of the ancient alchemists. Cleopatra the Alchemist, who likely lived in Greece in the early third century, wrote alchemical treatises that survive. Her symbols and drawings are “probably the earliest drawings that we have of chemical apparatus.” Zosimus of Panopolis was an Egyptian alchemist and gnostic mystic of the late third century, “heir to the ideas of Mary and Cleopatra.”

Roger Bacon was a medieval English Franciscan philosopher and scientist who devoted himself to the study of the new branches of learning he was introduced to at Oxford—language, optics and alchemy. He is the putative author of the Mirror of Alchemy (1597), a widely disseminated alchemical treatise. In this work he discusses the problematic nature of defining alchemy. In “many ancients Bookes,” writes Bacon in Chapter One, “Of the Definitions of Alchimy,” “there are found many definitions of this Art.” For Hermes, argues Bacon, “Alchemy is a Corporal Science simply composed of one and by one, naturally conjoining things more precious, by knowledge and effect, and converting them by a natural commixtion into a better kind” (15). For other scholars, he continues, “Alchemy is a Science, teaching how to transform any kind of metal into another.” Alchemy, he concludes, “therefore is a science teaching how to make and compound a certain medicine, which is called Elixir, the which when it is cast upon metals or imperfect bodies, does fully perfect them in the very projection” (17).
the study of the physical world we would call premodern and modern. It also extended from the mystical and the occult to the rigorously and experimentally scientific. To take an example, Mary the Jewess, an alchemist of the first century, first described the *bain marie*—a double boiler used to heat materials gently, still used in chemistry labs today.\(^{148}\) Yet she also formulated arcane alchemical precepts, such as: "Fume is completed by fume, and the white herb growing upon the mountain captures both."\(^{149}\)

In the early 1680s, Newton translated and wrote an in-depth commentary on the *Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus*.\(^{150}\) The *Emerald Table* is a cryptic piece of the *Hermetica*, which claims to contain the secret of the *prima materia* and its

\(^{148}\) Mary the Jewess appears in Zosimus’ quotations “as the originator of the major part of the processes used by the Greek alchemists.” According to Sherwood Taylor, the “elaborate ‘kerotakis’ apparatus, the hot-ash bath, the dung-bed and the water-bath (*bain-marie*) are all apparently her inventions or discoveries, while it appears likely that she perfected the apparatus for distillation of liquids in a form so efficient as to have suffered little alteration in two millennia” (111). Mary’s practical character “distinguishes her very notably from all other alchemists. She describes apparatus in detail, even to the method of constructing the copper tubes required from sheet metal.” For more information about Greek alchemists and their practical contribution to modern science, see Taylor 109–39.

\(^{149}\) Michael Maier attributes this phrase to Mary the Jewess in his 1617 *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum*. The *Symbola* contains a section entitled *Mariae Hebraeae symbolum*. Maier, a leading figure in seventeenth century alchemy, was a German physician and counselor to Rudolf II of Habsburg. According to Raphael Patai, “On the page following Maier’s introductory remarks there is an engraving showing Maria the Jewess superscribed as follows: ‘Fume is completed by fume, and the white herb growing upon the small mountain captures both.’ The engraving itself shows Maria as a stately woman dressed in an ample robe with a hoodlike cap over her head, pointing with her left hand to a small mountain on which grows a white herb, exhibiting five branches each topped with a flower. At the foot of the mountain stands an urn from which rise two columns of smoke, which separate so as to circle the white herb like a wreath, and unite with other two fumes that descend from an inverted urn which is the mirror image of the one below, and which seems to be suspended from heaven” (76).

\(^{150}\) “The first of Newton’s translations,” writes Tessa Morrison, “dated to the early 1680’s, was the *Emerald Tablet*. It is one of the best-known alchemical texts in history. In the early 1670’s, prior to translating the *Emerald Tablet*, Newton experimented with quicksilver and sulfur. He conducted these experiments over a small furnace, experimenting with the cooling, heating, and mixing of quicksilver and sulfur, and recorded all of his experimentalations and observations” (17). The first phrase of the table is cryptic and redundant. In Newton’s translation: “That wch is below is like that wch is above & that wch is above is like yt wch is below to do ye miracles of one only thing.”
transmutation. Sulfur and quicksilver, he writes, “are one thing, like man and wife.” On “account of this affinity,” he continues, “they unite like male and female, and they act on each other, and through that action they are mutually transmuted into each other and procreate a more noble off-spring to accomplish the miracles of this one thing.”

Conjunction, as formulated in this definition of alchemy—a commonly recurring one—is the union of “the opposing, sexually differentiated principles, Sulphur and Mercury (not the common varieties) variously referred to as male and female, king and queen, the red man and the white wife, brother and sister, and many other forms” (Linden 7). Alchemists in various cultures sought the elixir of immortality (also known as the philosopher’s stone). Medieval alchemists, argues Gerald Gruman, “singled out gold for special praise as a vitalizing agent” (112).

The eighth century Iranian mystic, cosmologist and alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan is the putative author of the important synoptic alchemical work, The Sum of Perfection, or The Perfect Magistry (1678). In the eight chapter of the book, “Of Sol, or Gold,” he argues that gold is the most precious of

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151 The Prima materia, or first matter, is the ubiquitous starting material required for the philosopher’s stone—the alchemist’s holy grail. In Hugh King’s description: “Take any substance and break down its form, analyzing it into matter…Then take this matter…and analyze it again until you have found another matter. Break down this matter into its matter, and so on until imagination has peeled away the last vestige of form and laid matter bare. This ideal terminus of material analysis will be the matter behind all matter, the eternal potentiality without the form and so without actuality, prima materia” (370).

152 One of the principles of Western alchemy, writes Stanton Linden, is the idea that “metals were living substances, that natural gold was the end result of long ‘gestation’ within earth’s womb; and adopting the metaphor of human and divine sexual differentiation and conjunction, that Sulphur and mercury were the ‘reproductive fluids’ from which metals arose” (7).

153 Compare this idea of rejuvenation to the pantomime of making objects “last” in the company’s latrines. The company cannot build or make latrines—it merely imports them. It therefore cannot teach its workers how to make these latrines either. To compensate for this ineptitude, the company proselytizes, i.e. it gives public demonstrations of how to care for these latrines so that they last longer.
metals, because it “tingeth and transforms every body.” As medicine, he continues, gold is also “rejoicing,” since it conserves “the body in youth” (80).

In the title page to Maier’s *Tripus aureus* appears a graphic illustration of an alchemical laboratory (see Figure 5). The illustration is a depiction of the doubleness of alchemy, a discipline practical and theoretical, exoteric and esoteric, regenerating and amalgamating. The picture is divided in two. On the viewer’s right there is a laboratory, and a man busy at the fire. On the left, there are a library and three men (an abbot, a monk, and a layman) confabulating. In the middle, on top of the furnace, is a tripod with a round flask—inside the flask, a winged dragon. The dragon, claims Carl Jung, symbolizes “the visionary experience of the alchemist as he works in his laboratory and ‘theorizes’” (22).

In the anonymous ninth-century alchemical poem “Poem of the Philosopher Theophrastos Upon the Sacred Art,” Theophrastos describes “the first step in the process of transmutation, the process of albification or conversion of the base metal into silver” (Stanton 50). The conversion of the metal is described by Theophrastos through the allegory of a dragon. In the poem, “great clouds of steaming mist ascend” and “become on rising dense enough to bear away the dragon from the sea and lift him upward to a station warm.” Then the “moisture of the air” becomes “his lightened shape and form sustaining [substance].” Lastly, it “change[s] its nature to a stream divine with quenching draughts” (39). The dragon’s transmutation happens in stages. From dragon he becomes air; from air, he becomes a spring of water.154

154 According to Carl Jung, in the axiom of Mary, “the even numbers which signify the feminine principle, earth, the regions under the earth, and evil itself, are interpolated between the uneven numbers of the Christina dogma. They are personified by the *serpens mercurrii*, the dragon that creates and destroys itself and represents the prima materia” (23). In his book, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), Jung drew on various alchemical precepts and images to explore his ideas about the unconscious and to make viable a greater
According to Paracelsus, the celebrated mystic and alchemist of the Renaissance, “aqua regis” can be used to multiply quantities of gold. *Aqua regia*, a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid, dissolves gold and platinum. For the alchemist to “exalt gold so high that it grows in a crucible, like a tree,” writes Paracelsus, he must first dissolve the gold “with aqua regis until it turns into a kind of chalk” (Stanton 155). Then he must “put this into a gourd-shaped glass and pour some fresh aqua regis on it.” After heating and distilling this substance several times, gold will rise and grow “like a tree in the glass, with many branches and trees.” In other words, gold will be multiplied.\(^{155}\)

Alchemy had staunch proponents (who made undeniable contributions to science, such as the *bain marie* mentioned above), but also fierce detractors and persecutors. The Church was always opposed to it. Pope John XXII’s 1317 edict forbade the practice of alchemy, calling it “Crimine Falsi.”\(^{156}\)

A few short decades later, Ibn Khaldun, the great Arab traveler and one of the founders of modern sociology, argued that alchemy was merely a play of appearances. He gave the example of a Berber alchemist, “who would

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\(^{155}\) *José* Arcadio does not actually make gold. He does, however, become a sort of tree. When he goes mad, Úrsula ties him to the chestnut tree in their backyard. He lives his last years bound to it, not even leaving when he is untied from the tree. He is a sort of anthropomorphized tree: “Un tufo de hongos tiernos, de flor de palo, de antigua y reconcentrada intemperie impregnó el aire del dormitorio cuando empezó a respirarlo el viejo colosal macerado por el sol y la lluvia” ‘A smell of tender mushrooms, of wood-flower fungus, of old and concentrated outdoors impregnated the air of the bedroom as it was breathed by the colossal old man weather-beaten by the sun and the rain’ (34; 72). *José* Arcadio’s conversion into a tree is itself a sort of transmutation of Daphne’s conversion in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

\(^{156}\) *Spondent Partier* was a 1317 papal decretal which forbade the practice of alchemy. Alchemists, says the decretal, “paint a false picture...they talk up a transmutation and produce it that way.” But it “was not the possible theological ramifications of the science to which the Holy father directed his ire,” writes P.G. Maxwell Stuart. What most preoccupied him was “the crime of manufacturing and distributing false coins” (66).
cover silver with a gold veneer or blanch copper with mercury to make it look like silver” (Stuart 62). In the 16th and 17th centuries, even alchemists of great repute, such as Michael Maier and Heinrich Khunrath, condemned other putative practitioners of alchemy, calling them “false alchemists” who performed “fraudulent transmutations.” Maier, for example, accused “fraudulent transmutators” of hiding nuggets of gold inside lumps of charcoal.

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157 Etienne-François Geoffroy’s 1722 “Some Cheats Concerning the Philosopher’s Stone” relates some of the methods used by fraudulent transmutators of metals: hiding gold in crucibles and in stills under false bottoms. (Geoffroy is mostly known today for his research into chemical affinity.) According to Lawrence Principe, “it has been shown that the majority of Geoffroy’s paper is cribbed from the Examen fucorum pseudochymicorum, a well-known work published in 1617 by Michael Maier and used to defend transmutational alchemy” (96).

158 By “damaging the credibility of entrepreneurial alchemists,” argues Tara Nummedal, “alchemists like Maier could increase their own authority in a competitive patronage marketplace” (172).
Part 3. Stories Mined and Minted

“...it appeared to me that they were very poor in everything.”
-Christopher Columbus’s Diary, Friday October 12, 1492.

In *Nostromo* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the alchemical method—
transmutation of metals—emerges as a possible antidote to the severance caused by
extraction—unearthing of metals. Through a syncretic compendium of stories, letters,
reports, rumors and linguistic registers, these two novels beget entire fictional universes.
Costaguana and Macondo are mirror images of potentially real places. Using the tools of
the alchemist—syncretism, revaluation and experimentation—these two authors
reimagine not only the novel, but also the worlds it can describe and contain. The skilled
pursuit of practices which lead to conjunction, regeneration and transmutation, rather
than severance, anatomization and accumulation, Conrad and García Márquez suggest,
can help mend the epistemological gaps that result from continued political and
economic dependency and the extractive processes initiated by multinational
corporations, which disenfranchise local knowledge.\footnote{The idea of anatomizing the world to understand it was made popular by Francis Bacon in the 17th century. Bacon suggested breaking up the world into pieces as a potential solution to man's anthropocentric interpretive tendencies. The segmentation of knowledge was a novel idea which fueled the Enlightenment and spurred numerous scientific discoveries. But this method also "led to the disastrous separation of science from religion, of morals form psychology, and of man from nature" (Beaurline 51).} It can also set forth a dramatic
process of reconfiguration and revaluation, in which alternative ways of knowing and
doing are enabled and valued.

Recuperating practice-based modes of knowing and experiencing makes it
possible to redress gaps in knowledge resulting from the perpetuation of obfuscatng
ideology, the unofficial implementation of paramilitary forms of control, and the extreme
segmentation of knowledge. Through idiosyncratic forms of seeing and knowing shaped by particular processes of making, the world reemerges anew; it can be seen and felt afresh. In this process of reemergence, knowledge and forms of knowing get reappropriated and repurposed—rather than being randomly prescribed or forcefully superimposed. Through this reappropriation, local narratives and modes of making and seeing become perceptible and valuable, rather than unnoticed and undervalued. Alchemy serves as a central metaphor for this possible reversal, which is a steady source of apprehension and wonder in both novels.
**Fantastic Intrusions**

Unlike the alchemist, who works with his hands to create something unknown through fusion, Gould’s approach to metals is extractive. His approach to knowledge, it follows, is also extractive. Gould removes what is unfamiliar to him about the mine to arrive at a “plain truth.” His resistance to mystique is necessary—it enables his desire to act, rather than to practice or experiment. But Gould’s dismissal of local legends concerning the mine—which he calls “fantastic intrusions”—reflects his extractive, anti-alchemical mentality. The truth he arrives at is necessarily incomplete, and, although plain, unable to capture the multifaceted reality of the mine and the minting of metals.

In *Nostromo*, Conrad relies on stories to find meaning where there is none. By repurposing and blending stories from all walks of life, Conrad comes closer to finding his holy grail: an eloquent voice, speaking in the face of chaos and obscurity. According to Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, Conrad uses stories to conjure up a semblance of meaning out of that which is basically meaningless and disordered, but which presents itself as meaningful and ordered. The “plotting of stories” argues Brooks, “remains necessary even where we have ceased to believe in the plots we use” (242). At the end of Marlow’s journey in *Heart of Darkness*, continues Brooks, “lies not ivory, gold, or a fountain of youth, but the capacity to turn experience into a language: a voice.” Conrad collects stories from all arenas of life and includes them in his novel to paint a disquieting picture of Costaguana’s history. Stories provide unique epistemological frameworks by which to approach the world. Born of experience and practice, stories are better equipped to guide us towards potential meaning than disembodied and preset narratives. Conrad’s syncretic approach to stories calls to mind the technical yet
enigmatic process by which alchemy seeks to understand the unknown through unprescribed processes of making and amalgamating.

Gould ignores the story of the two gringo miners—“spectral and alive”—believed by the people of Sulaco “to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks, under the fatal spell of their success” (55). Their “souls cannot tear themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the discovered treasure” (my emphasis). In this story, miners are not separate from the thing they extract. Instead, their souls remain perpetually bound to the treasures they excavate. This perpetual binding, as opposed to severance, recalls practices of alchemy, which seek to create by way of fusion, binding and replication, rather than by separation, extraction and individuation.

Gould’s pragmatic aversion to stories like this one does not make him any wiser. The history of Costaguana (like the history of Hawaii, according to Marshall Sahlins in *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*) “often repeats itself, since only the second time is it an event. The first time it is myth” (9). The story of the spectral gringos is a version not only of Gould’s story, but also, in a deeper sense, of *Nostromo*’s. According to Robert Penn Warren, this story is, “of course, a fable of greed and of the terrifying logic of material interests unredeemed,” yet also “a fable...of man lost in the blankness of nature” (388). Gould fails to see the relevance of stories to his own life. But, as Sahlins claims, “later heroes are genealogical descendants of generic concepts, and so transpose the relationship of the concepts in an historico-pragmatic mode, i.e., as their own

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160 The novelistic repetition or expansion of a mythical or archetypical trope recurs in Conrad’s *Nostromo*. According to Frye, “the quest for buried treasure has been a central theme of romance from the Siegfried cycle to *Nostromo*, and is unlikely exhausted yet. Treasure means wealth, which in mythopoetic romance often means wealth in its ideal forms, power and wisdom.” The “tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience” Frye designates “romantic” (Frye 140, 192).
natures and deeds” (13). Ultimately, Gould’s personal experience is a transfiguration of his mythical antecedents. In spite of his self-conception, his actual experience follows more closely the intense yet reiterative patterns of alchemy than the extractive, dislocating patterns of mining.

Gould can see the mine’s “plain truth” (with an eye toward profit) only because he’s also ignorant of the truth (and ignorant of his ignorance too). “Charles Gould was competent because he had no illusions. The Gould Concession had to fight for life with such weapons as could be found at once in the mire of corruption that was so universal as to almost lose its significance. He was prepared to stop for his weapons” (75). But a clear and pragmatic vision of the mine is necessarily misguided and incomplete, failing as it does to account for the realness of the mine’s mythic qualities and its paralegal reliance on physical force and mechanical weapons.

Conrad is acutely aware that Gould’s tale is an extension or a reenactment—a mirror image—of local legends and stories about the mine and those who meddle with it. Conrad, writes Penn Warren, made no “split between literature and life. If anything, he insisted on the deepest inward relationship”—a relationship which Gould, on the other hand, determinedly disavows. Conrad’s refusal to abstract Gould’s situation from past stories makes his approach to stories and their telling more like the alchemist’s than the extractor’s. Conrad’s novel is a mixture of instances which, put together, result in something qualitatively different—an enigmatic transformation and reconfiguration of that which is already known (but by some ignored or unseen).

Gould’s situation becomes increasingly ironic and almost Oedipean: his competency explains his rise as much as it does the mine’s downfall. Gould “sees” the mine clearly because he is impervious to illusion, dismissing others’ warnings and portents as alarmist and benighted. But this seeing, uninformed by practices of making,
is only partial—Gould cannot understand that his success has more to do with his ownership of weapons than his technical and operational knowledge about mining. Gould’s disavowal of illusion is itself an illusion—all the more dangerous since it does not recognize itself as such. “Action,” says the narrator of *Nostromo*, “is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusion” (76).

Gould is asocial and detached. He “has isolated himself” and is “uncounseled, and cannot counsel others” (“The Storyteller” 32). El Rey de Sulaco, says Martin Decoud to Doña Emila, “thinks himself, no doubt, a very honest man. And so he is, if one could look behind his taciturnity” (211). Benjamin’s storyteller, on the other hand, is a social animal who relates his experiences to his audience. He “takes what he tells from experience” and makes it “the experience of those who are listening to his tale.” Said makes a similar point when he says that stories “originate in the hearing and telling presence of people to each other” (120).

Gould’s interest in mines is at first contemplative, hands-off, even novelistic, rather than applied and communally constructed: “Mines had acquired for him a dramatic interest. He studied their peculiarities from a personal point of view, too, as one would study the varied characters of men...” (53; my emphasis). The mine serves as a platform for surveying human character rather than encountering human skill or immersing oneself in experience. Gould’s point of view is merely “personal.” It casts aside the public sphere of action and speech in favor of the private world of introspection and the private pursuit of economic gain.

Conrad’s *Nostromo* reincorporates the craft-bound tactics of the storyteller to become its own sort of novel. Conrad is interested in exploring what binds communities together and what tears them apart. This makes Conrad into a particular sort of
craftsman: his self-conscious interest in his own and others’ practices is something more and something other than merely making a thing for the sake of making it.

Describing the life and mind of the young Charles Gould, the narrator of *Nostromo* says:

To be told repeatedly that one’s future is blighted because of the possession of a silver-mine is not, at the age of fourteen, a matter of prime importance as to its main statement; but in its form it is calculated to excite a certain amount of wonder and attention. In course of time the boy, at first only puzzled by the angry jeremiads, but rather sorry for his dad, began to turn the matter over in his mind in such moments as he could spare from play and study. In about a year he had evolved from the lecture of the letters a definite conviction that there was a silver-mine in the Sulaco province of the republic of Costaguana, where poor Uncle Harry had been shot by soldiers a great many years before. There was also connected closely with that mine a thing called the “iniquitous Gould Concession,” apparently written on a paper which his father desired ardently to “tear and fling into the faces” of presidents, members of judicature, and ministers of state. And this desire persisted, though the names of these people, he noticed, seldom remained the same for a whole year together. This desire (since the thing was iniquitous) seemed quite natural to the boy, though why the affair was iniquitous he did not know. Afterwards, with advancing wisdom, he managed to clear the plain truth of the business from the fantastic intrusions of the Old Man of the Sea, vampires, and ghouls, which had lent to his father’s correspondence the flavor of a gruesome Arabian Night’s tale. (52)\(^{161}\)

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161 The complex use of narrative layers and frames in stories, argues Benjamin in “The Storyteller,” was thought up, in large part, by errant, storytelling traders. In the words of Benjamin, “to say nothing of the by no means negligible part merchants have played in perfecting the art of storytelling; they did not contribute as much by increasing the amount of instructive content as by refining the ruses used to capture the listener’s attention” (66). Traders’ tricks, continues Benjamin, “left a deep imprint on the cycle *The Thousand and One Nights*. *The Thousand and One Nights,* argues Urbina in his article “Las mil y una noches y Cien años de soledad: falsas presencias e influencias definitivas,” is an obvious precursor of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez borrows many of the narrative techniques used in this compilation of medieval folk tales, in particular repetition, mirroring, and circularity.
In the first instance, the story of the San Tomé mine is a fantastic one, transmitted orally across generations: “[the story's] form...calculated to excite a certain amount of wonder and attention.” It retains the indefiniteness of the stories told by crafty Scheherazade or by Homer’s “unerring old man of the sea, immortal Proteus of Egypt,” who assumes “all manner of shapes of all things that move upon the earth, and of water, and of wondrous blazing fire” (34). These stories, like alchemical procedures, seek to “excite a certain amount of wonder.”

As Charles grows older, the story of the mine loses its original, indefinite form. It becomes a specific, and eventually official, certified matter: “In about a year he had evolved from the lecture of the letters a definite conviction...” (my emphasis). Mediation and evolution deprive the originary tale of its initial marvelousness, turning it instead into a “definite” thing. Added levels of textual intervention, in particular an official document “written on a paper which his father ardently desired to ‘tear and fling’ into the faces of presidents,” further validate the mine’s existence to the young Gould, while also extirpating its wondrous, mythical elements.

But Conrad is more than a little ironic about Gould’s studiously pragmatic conviction of the mine’s future—his account of the mine is cohesive but not definite. The official document which ultimately convinces Gould of the concreteness of the “iniquitous Gould Concession” is, on closer inspection, a protean artefact—an instance of dramatic irony achieved through layering, mediation and transformation. Formally, the official document is susceptible to being flung and torn, and its content is variable, too: “the names of the people he noticed, seldom remained the same for a whole year together” (52). The phrase “definite conviction” proves ironic in light of what follows. Similarly, the phrase, “managed to clear the plain truth of the business from the fantastic intrusions of the Old Man of the sea,” is ambiguous. By impugning the veracity of the
“fantastic intrusions” first used to describe the San Tomé mine, Gould sets himself up to depart from all that is known of the truth, just as he decides to take over the mine. Rather than denying these fantastic mythical intrusions, Conrad reworks them—he reincorporates them into his novel, and in so doing transforms them without diminishing them.
Melquíades’ Alchemical Laboratory

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez promotes and reproduces practices of creation that follow the principles of alchemy: fusion, conjunction and regeneration. Alchemy works as a metaphor for a certain type of writing—the art of making the prosaic poetic. García Márquez’s compositions are alloys—heteroglossic, multicultural and cross-generic. Their multiplicity disrupts characters’ (and readers’) sense of reality, promoting alternative methods of knowing, seeing and narrating.  

Furthermore, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* describes these alchemical processes literally: the Buendías are the proud owners of an alchemical laboratory which they revive over generations. In the novel, alchemy is a process whereby what seems worthless or invaluable is made valuable. It is, in this sense, reminiscent of García Márquez’s own artistic project, which seeks to revalue domestic and craft-based methods of acquiring knowledge, while also acknowledging the inherent difficulties of accomplishing such a seemingly magical feat.  

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162 Studies of alchemy in the works of García Márquez are rather limited. Those studies that do exist tend to focus on his works’ alchemical references and allusions, rather than on alchemy as metaphor for García Márquez’s artistic method. Chester Halka’s *Melquíades, Alchemy and Narrative Theory: The Quest for Gold in ‘Cien años de soledad’* studies *One Hundred Years of Solitude’s* wide range of references to alchemy, particularly incest and the tarot. It argues that García Márquez is more than merely familiar with the practice of alchemy. John Carson Pettey’s “Some Implications of Yellow and Gold in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: Color Symbolism” examines the use of color or symbolism in the larger picture painted in García Márquez’s seminal novel. It pays close attention to the use of yellow, the color of gold; however, it does not dwell on something which I will explore here: how García Márquez advocates alchemical process and structures as potential epistemological avenues for seeing and narrating the story of Macondo and its dwellers. Benjamín Torres Caballero’s article, “La estructura Urobórica de “Cien años de Soledad,” makes a claim closer to mine. According to Caballero, *One Hundred Year of Solitude’s* “open structure” is ouroboric—a circular structure that “bites its own tale.” The ouroboros is a classic figure from the annals of alchemy. However, unlike Caballero, I argue that the act of storytelling is not only ouroboric, but also self-regenerating and transformative.  

163 Alchemical instruction, as Michela Pereira claims, “always took place outside the universities, where Latin was the common language; and the relationship between alchemists and their pupils had more features in
Gabriel García Márquez’s Melquíades is a wise, corpulent gypsy: “un gitano corpulento, de barba montaraz y manos de gorrión, que se presentó con el nombre de Melquíades” ‘A heavy gypsy with an untamed beard and sparrow hands, who introduced himself as Melquiïades’ (3; 4). From faraway places he brings to Macondo worldly wonders and inventions like ice and astrolabes, magnets and magnifiers: “Primero llevaron el imán...Melquíades, hizo una truculenta demostración pública de lo que él mismo llamaba la octava maravilla de los sabios alquimistas de Macedonia” ‘First they brought the magnet...Melquiïades put on a bold public demonstration of what he himself called the eighth wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia.’ Melquiïades shares the secrets of alchemy with José Arcadio Buendía and his sons: “Melquiïades dejó muestras de los siete metales correspondientes a los siete planetas, las fórmulas de Moisés y Zósimo para el doblado del oro, y una serie de apuntes y dibujos sobre los procesos del Gran Magisterio” ‘Melquiïades left samples of the seven metals that corresponded to the seven planets, the formulas of Moses and Zosimus for doubling the quantity of gold, and a set of notes and sketches concerning the processes of the Great Teaching.’ García Márquez has his own share of Melquiïades’ secret alchemical knowledge.

Early in the novel, Melquiïades gifts José Arcadio an alchemical laboratory in recognition of José Arcadio’s discovery that “la tierra es redonda como una naranja” ‘The earth is round, like an orange’ (4; 5). José Arcadio attains this knowledge using a set of

common with craft apprenticeship, or with the teaching of medicine prior to the school of Salento, than with university teaching.” The alchemists, continues Pereira, “defined themselves as philosophers and acted as a cultural elite,” but “never became schoolmen.” See Pereira, 336–38.

164 The words and images used by García Márquez follow alchemical models and paradigms linguistically in other senses. Consider, for example, One Hundred Years of Solitude’s deployment of anagrams. Anagrams change the order of the letters in a word (its substance) to transform it into another. Melquiïades does not just practice alchemy—he is alchemy. The Spanish phrase “es de alquímia” (“it’s about alchemy”) is a very near anagram of Melquiïades.
nautical instruments—an astrolabe, a sextant and a compass—and a collection of Portuguese maps which Melquíades gives him in exchange for a magnifying glass. (The magnifying glass used to belong to Melquíades, too, but, earlier in the novel, he sells it to José Arcadio for a couple of doubloons.) José Arcadio’s discovery is based on his own manipulation and handling of foreign and local material, rather than being imparted or dictated to him from afar.

José Arcadio studies these items with zealous devotion. He stares at the sun and the stars for hours on end. Once he becomes an expert handler of these instruments, the narrator claims, he is able to visit and explore unknown and splendid places without leaving his office. “Cuando se hizo expert en el uso y el manejo de sus instrumentos, tuvo una noción del espacio que le permitió navegar por mares incógnitos, visitar territorios deshabitados y trabar relaciones con seres espléndidos, sin necesidad de abandonar su gabinete” ‘When he became an expert in the use and manipulation of his instruments, he conceived a notion of space that allowed him to navigate across unknown seas, to visit uninhabited territories, and to establish relations with splendid beings without having to leave his study’ (3; 4). José Arcadio can “see” and “discover” unknown places because he has become, by his own means and methods, an expert craftsman and handler of instruments.

José Arcadio’s “feverish activity” eventually becomes a “fascination,” and it is in this state of bewitchment that José Arcadio realizes that the Earth is round. Melquíades is amazed at José Arcadio’s discovery. He publicly praises his intelligence—José Arcadio’s astounding ability to theorize an already proven phenomenon.

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165 José Arcadio’s “scientific” view, claims Raymond L. Williams, “is marked by a closeness to nature, with an orange as his metaphor for the world” (73). However, as Williams also notes, this naturalness is not that natural after all, since oranges are “not really the nature of the native natural world of Macondo,” but rather a European import.
Melquíades, writes García Márquez, “exaltó en público la inteligencia de aquel hombre que por pura especulación astronómica había construido una teoría ya comprobada en la práctica, aunque desconocida hasta entonces en Macondo, y como una prueba de su admiración le hizo un regalo que había de ejercer una influencia terminante en el futuro de la aldea: un laboratorio de alquimia.” ‘He gave public praise to the intelligence of a man who from pure astronomical speculation had evolved a theory that had already been proved in practice, although unknown in Macondo until then, and as a proof of his admiration he made him a gift that was to have a profound influence on the future of the village: the laboratory of an alchemist’ (5; 6). Melquíades gives José Arcadio an alchemical laboratory as a token of his admiration. The laboratory honors José Arcadio’s power to know by his own methods—to create and understand from the ground up rather than from the top down.

The “rudimentary” laboratory is populated with objects arcane and mundane. On the one hand, a profusion of pots, funnels, retorts, filters, and sieves. On the other, a primitive water pipe (“un atanor primitivo”), a beaker, a philosopher’s egg, samples of the seven metals, instruction manuals for the creation of the philosopher’s stone, and a still, “construido por los propios gitanos según las descripciones modernas del alambique de tres brazos de María la judía” ‘a still the gypsies themselves had built in accordance with modern descriptions of the three-armed alembic of Mary the Jew.’ It is a workshop, with a twist. It contains local artifacts and borrowed ones, eminently practical tools and completely mystical ones. It promotes creation and regeneration through the unexpected amalgamation of tools and materials. It does not lay down exact instructions for effecting this creation but instead encourages invention and experimentation, while also rewarding skill and technical prowess.
Alchemy is syncretic—it indiscriminately borrows ideas and methods from various traditions, religions and practices. Its seamless incorporation of varied traditions is nicely illustrated in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when Úrsula first visits Melquíades’ alchemical laboratory. The afternoon she visits the laboratory, she is overcome by its awful smell. The smell, we find out, is of bichloride of mercury; Melquíades has just broken a flask of it on the floor. Úrsula calls the smell diabolic, but Melquíades demurs: “—En absoluto—corrigió Melquíades—. Está comprobado que el demonio tiene propiedades sulfúricas, y esto no es más que un poco de solimán” ‘Not at all,” Melquíades corrected her. “It has been proven that the devil has sulphuric properties and this is just a little corrosive sublimate’ (6; 7). Melquíades refutes Úrsula’s assumption on queerly empirical grounds. He lets Úrsula know that what she is smelling is not sulfur, but bichloride of mercury. It cannot be diabolic, he continues, because it “has been proven” that the devil has sulphuric properties. In Melquíades’ estimation religion and empiricism are one and the same. Melquíades syncretic (even contradictory) yet self-contained knowledge, is an image of García Márquez’s own novel.

Along with the laboratory, Melquíades gives José Arcadio the formulas of Moses and Zosimus for doubling the quantity of gold, “el doblado del oro.” Seduced by the rewards promised by the formulas, José Arcadio attempts to double gold himself. He convinces Úrsula to give him her colonial coins and promises to increase them by as many times as it is possible to “subdividir el azogue” ‘subdivide mercury.’ (‘Azogue” is a word from the alchemical lexicon for what in Spanish is usually called “mercurio.”) In José Arcadio’s estimation, multiplication and division are correlative processes; they are symmetric forms of incrementation rather than asymmetric forms of diminution and incrementation. His understanding of division follows Bertrand Russell’s articulation of a “compact series.” According to Russell, this series, unlike the infinite progression from
one to infinity, is bound: its infinite components exist within the whole. José Arcadio’s idea of alchemy is therefore replicative while also being cohesive. The plundering of metals out of the earth, on the other hand, is accumulative—progressive—but not *plein*. It severs, leaving gaps rather than reshaped reiterations.

In an attempt at making gold, José Arcadio throws three doubloons into a pan and fuses them “con raspadura de cobre, orpimente, azufre y plomo” ‘fused them with copper filings, orpiment, brimstone, and lead.”166 He sets it all to boil in a pot of castor oil. But instead of gold, he makes a pestilent syrup, “más parecido al caramel o vulgar que al oro magnífico” ‘more like common caramel than valuable gold’ (8; 9). In his pursuit of gold, José Arcadio creates vulgar caramel. His search for gold diverges sharply from that of the Spaniards before him, who came to America looking for gold, and oddly enough, found it.167 Unlike José Arcadio, they did not, in their search for el Dorado, “find” anything precisely vulgar. Instead, what they saw and discovered there was, in fact, the perfect image of their own predetermined desires—a correspondence which transcends the possibility of mere coincidence.

José Arcadio’s vulgar creation perhaps reminds us that Latin America’s value lies not in the gold extracted from it—a colonial legacy—but in its people’s local, vulgar creations. José Arcadio continues to work on his mixture eagerly. He distills it again and melts it together with “siete metales planetarios” ‘seven planetary metals.’ He adds “mercurio hermético y el vitriolo de Chipre” ‘hermetic mercury and vitriol of Cyprus,’ and he cooks it up again in “manteca de cerdo a falta de aceite de rábano” ‘in hog fat for

166 Lead here appears as JUST another metal, rather than as an emblem of violent force, and in this sense places alchemy in direct contradistinction to extractive practices which rely on paramilitary forms violence, which I discussed in the first part of this chapter.

167 For a more thorough examination of García Márquez’s relation to colonial accounts of El Dorado, see Palencia-Roth, 41–48.

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lack of any radish oil’ (8; 10). But to no avail. Úrsula’s precious inheritance is reduced to “un chicharrón carbonizado que no pudo ser desprendido del fondo del caldero” ‘to a large piece of burnt hog cracklings that was firmly stuck to the bottom of the pot.’ José Arcadio’s “chicharrón carbonizado” is an accretive pattern, that is, the accumulation of seemingly redundant linguistic material. “Achicharrar” and “carbonizar” are different words that describe a similar process, the burning up of substance. The combined term “chicharrón carbonizado” intensifies whatever it is that José Arcadio creates. Moreover, José Arcadio’s tautological compound reflects a tautological process, albeit an alchemically sound one—José Arcadio uses gold to create more gold. But nothing of this gold remains visible in his “chicharrón carbonizado.” José Arcadio’s creation is also happenstance—he mixes in whatever he has on hand—a tendency which is a response to a perceived lack, which may simultaneously challenge the actuality of this lack.

José Arcadio’s amalgamation of ingredients esoteric and exoteric (“vitriolo de chipre” and “aceite de rábano”); exotic and familiar (“siete metales planetarios,” “manteca de cerdo”); precious and base (“doblones,” “plomo”) does not result in chrysopoeia (the alchemical term for the successful transmutation into gold). However, García Márquez’s use of palindromes and puns in this passage does result in a successful alchemical reaction. The word doubloon comes from the Spanish “doblón,” which means double. The coin was so called because it was worth two ducats and because it had two faces: queen Isabel on the one side, king Ferdinand on the other. The phrase “doblar el oro” is duplicative—to double Úrsula’s fortune is to double her doubloons, which are already double. In other words, to double what is already double is to multiply—a simple formula that, unlike José Arcadio’s, successfully doubles the quantity of gold. “Doblar” also means to fold, and being symmetrically foldable in on itself is the structural form of a palindrome. The word “oro” is one such palindrome. The formula to double gold is to
double that which is already a palindrome; we perform the act of alchemy as we read the words.

Through the generations of the Buendía family, several experiments are conducted in the laboratory. Aureliano, José Arcadio’s son, spends “horas interminables” ‘interminable hours’ in the laboratory, “aprendiendo por pura investigación el arte de la platería” ‘learning the art of silverwork by his own experimentation’ (19; 26). Unlike his father, Aureliano is able to create gold out of “aqua regia.” In the second chapter of One Hundred Years of Solitude, Aureliano turns mercury into vapor and makes “aqua regia.” Having found the formula for the creation of gold, he spends his time gilding various artifacts. For example, he spends an entire night in the laboratory gilding a brooch, “dorando un prendedor,” which he presents to Úrsula for her birthday. On another occasion, José Arcadio gives Aureliano the keys to their house and a little money (reasoning that his son might be “in need of a woman”). With his father’s money Aureliano buys muriatic acid. He prepares “aqua regia” again, and he “beautifies” the keys by plating them in gold: “pero Aureliano gastó el dinero en ácido muriático para preparar agua regia y embelleció las llaves con un baño de oro” ‘But Aureliano spent the money on muriatic acid to prepare some aqua regia and he beautified the keys by plating them with gold’ (19; 26). Aureliano’s alchemical creations are anti-utilitarian and anti-romantic—he is interested in the keys not because they open doors, or open doors for ladies, but because they can be reworked. His gilding of a “prendedor” is an image of his interest in craft for the sake of craft, rather than in the more entrepreneurial (“emprendedor”) pursuit of profit for the sake of profit.

168 Interestingly enough, the name Aureliano, equivalent to Aurelian or Aurelianus, is derived from the Latin word for gold, aurum. Aureliano is thus “the golden one.” Similarly, Charles Gould’s last name, in Conrad’s Nostromo, is an alteration or modification through aggregation of the English word, gold.
Conclusion

_Nostromo_ and _One Hundred Years of Solitude_ are full of moments when a miasma of ideals clouds what is real. These moments are often associated with the workings and vocabulary of the post-colonial state. Imposed systems of post-colonial rule exist aslant reality. They create an unbridgeable distance between governance and practice, alienating the governed from the governors. This displacement of language and its uses, of action and politics, as shown in this chapter, is at the heart of García Márquez and Conrad’s literary universe. García Márquez and Conrad explore the deformation of local practices and ways of experiencing under perverse systems of political and economic rule.

Costaguana and Macondo’s ruling families use a language which in its foreignness is obscurantist. This language covers up the real mechanism by which order is imposed in these places—violence. Its grandiloquent phrases are parodic, speaking to a certain fungibility of ideologies—they excel insofar as they obscure the actual, paralegal practices that are a condition of possibility for their enterprise—enterprises which are based on detachment and removal rather than synthesis and recreation.

Extractive economies do not just separate resources from the land, they also distance this land from its inhabitants and their ability to shape it and know it. García Márquez and Joseph Conrad seek to narrow this distance by contrasting forms of knowing and seeing bound to practices of making, with forms of knowing and seeing based on extraction and anatomization. They suggest that by seaming the gaps between knowledge and practice, experience and its transmission, we might find instances of meaning amidst chaos, obfuscation and disorder. Yet this sort of suturing is necessarily difficult in a post-industrial, globalized world. To make local forms of acquiring meaning
valuable and meaningful, an alchemical, almost magical, process of transmutation and revaluation is necessary.

Alchemy, more than any science and pseudoscience in the history of the Islamicate world and Europe, has always been itself and its opposite. It is paradoxical, in that it represents thesis and antithesis, and at the same time synthesis. The techniques of mirroring, duplication, parody, irony and amalgamation in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Nostromo* imply a longing for a more thorough connection between practices of making and practices of knowing, between experience and creation. In these works, promoting alchemical processes and techniques is also promoting the revelatory epistemological frameworks that emerge from idiosyncratic forms of experimenting and creating—potential avenues for regeneration and revaluation. In these two novels, ways of knowing tied to processes of recreation and regeneration emerge as a form of resistance to procedures that interfere with man’s connection to the work of his hands and the land on which he stands.
Chapter 4. Progress Romanced

In this chapter I explore craft and its relation to disenchantment and re-enchantment in the novels and stories of Joseph Conrad and Gabriel García Márquez. Through the figure of the nonchalant workman, these two authors reenchant disenchanted worlds. In their works, ordinary craftsmen are more equipped to see and discuss the world’s marvels than ostensible visionaries or theoretical virtuosi. In *Heart of Darkness, Nostromo* and *The Shadow Line*, the technical and verbal knowledge derived from everyday practices and experiences paradoxically equips craftsmen to see and redescribe intrinsically enchanted worlds. It also equips them to perceive without falling prey to ersatz enchantment—enchantment that occludes rather than reveals effective physical situations and social circumstances. In *No One Writes to the Colonel* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, everyday life is susceptible to enchantment. In these works, characters either accept the sudden intrusion of enchantment matter-of-factly or they candidly disavow it. The “disavowers” reject perceptual evidence in favor of more systematic—albeit inscrutable—accounts of reality. These elaborate accounts, however, mystify the real more than they elucidate or systematically explain it.

“The world of the living,” writes Conrad in the preface to *The Shadow Line*, “contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is” (xix). These real “marvels and mysteries,” he continues, “act upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that they would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state” (my
Throughout his career, García Márquez made similar points. In a 1995 opinion piece in *El Boletín Cultural*, he disputed the claim that he had “invented magical realism.” He argued that he was not magic’s inventor, but, instead, “el notario de la realidad” ‘reality’s notary.’ In another article in the Mexican newspaper *Reforma*, he argued that the first condition of magical realism is to narrate an event that is “rigurosamente cierto” ‘rigorously true,’ but “parece fantástico” ‘seems fantastic.’ In fact, he adds, there exist real things he chooses not to write about because they would appear unbelievable to readers. García Márquez’s “magic” and Joseph Conrad’s “enchanted state” are nothing but a special form of recounting what is already there. Conrad’s trained observations of the natural world reveal its wonders without explaining them away. García Márquez recounts the fantastic with a notary’s attention to detail, but without the notary’s officialdom.

For these two authors, it follows, the real is enchanted as it is given. But finding where this enchantment lies requires perspicacity and the acknowledgement and restoration of local, practice-bound, experimental forms of working. Using a language that is ironic yet grounded in practice—a fresh mixture of precision and extravagance, technicality and imagination—these two authors puncture pretentious and theoretical attempts to either disenchant or reenchant the world. That is, by describing modes of understanding based on technical expertise or on everyday commonsense practices and conventions, Conrad and García Márquez counteract the mystifications of and hiatuses that arise from forced attempts at interpreting and ordering the world through external theoretical notions of reason, progress, development and even magic.

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169 One way Conrad “talks about enchantment,” argues Michael Kotzin, is as “a quality perceived in the universe, usually beautiful, exotic, and superior to what is common, but also an illusion: not an aspect of reality that is different from the everyday one but a distorted perception of the true reality” (14).
The compulsion to interpret all worlds according to borrowed and speculative principles, is, for these two authors, an endless source of distortion and mystification. Ideas of order and reliability become, in practice, unreliable and arbitrary, albeit “official.” Rather than spreading the rule of law or institutional security, these maladjusted notions of legitimacy, enfranchisement, order and progress perpetuate dispossession and material scarcity. They also bring about a crucial gap between practice and rhetoric, experience and its narration. To mend this gap, García Márquez and Conrad reimagine alternative worlds and modes of narration. In particular, they reconfigure the novel to reveal worlds that are, for those in charge of them, in theory well-ordered, but in practice less so. By suffusing the novel with elements of romance—repetition, chance and timelessness—these two authors defy the novel’s canonical virtues of personal improvement and narrative causality and the epic’s emphasis on telos and origins. 170

Conrad and García Márquez’s ironic use of romance strategies emerges—to use Angela Carter’s terminology—as “a system of continuing inquiry,” which calls into

170 The belief that magical thinking is directly opposed to causal thinking has been challenged by critics in the past century. “It would be impossible,” argues Marcel Mauss in his seminal text *A General Theory of Magic* (1902), “not to consider magic as a scientific discipline” (78). Magic’s “exclusive aim” is, after all “to produce results.” Ultimately, argues Mauss, “magic gives every outward appearance of being a gigantic variation on the theme of the principle of causality.” In “El arte narrativo y la magia” (“Narrative Art and Magic”), Jorge Luis Borges argues that magic is not the contradiction of causality, but its nightmarish culmination. “La magia es la coronación o pesadilla de lo causal, no su contradicción” ‘Magic is the culmination or the nightmare of the causal, not its contradiction’ (178; my translation). For Bényei “rational causality” is “supplementally related to magical causality” (160). It therefore has the power to subvert the principle of causality, to reveal “the figure that causality is.” Bényei argues persuasively that both rational causality and magical causality function, ultimately, as tropes. Other critics, such as Roger Caillois, have argued (following Georges Bataille) that acts of mimicry, including sympathetic magic, defy instrumental logic since they tend not to serve a useful purpose.
question inherited, static meaning.\textsuperscript{171} In their hands, the established and cohesive realist novel becomes inconsistent, parodic, hybrid, expansive—and at the same time historical and unchanging, mundane and magical, unpredictable and repetitive. Narratives that are cyclical, digressive and episodic become the characteristic device by which the past, present and future are knitted into a newly and differently comprehensible tapestry.

\textsuperscript{171} The phrase, a “system of continuing inquiry,” is Angela Carter’s (12). According to Carter, “speculative fiction” is a “system of continuing inquiry.” It is the fiction “of asking ‘what if.’” It asks its readers “complicated questions about what we expect from human relations,” without necessarily providing straightforward answers. For a more thorough investigation of Carter and Chaucer’s use of stories and romance “to negotiate between repetition and reinterpretation of literary and cultural heritage beyond stable meanings and values,” see Pireddu 117–48.
Part 1. Pilgrims of Progress: Gimmick or Tact?

Marlow vs. Minions

In this section I will examine the multiple valences of the word “progress” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. I will show how Marlow uses “progress” in two different senses—poetic and subversive. When he uses “progress” in the technical sense, Marlow attests to his professionalism and expertise. He means it as physical forward movement—advancement from point A to point B. Marlow’s progress has no ideological connotations, it merely designates forward motion. Leopold’s men use “progress” in a sense that Marlow deprecates as imprecise, tendentious, and self-promoting—casting them as ideologues rather than technicians. By using the word “progress” in an exact yet enigmatic sense, Marlow becomes an enemy to the inadequate, obscurantist, Belgian sense of “progress.”

Like Leopold II’s real-life minions, his fictional minions in *Heart of Darkness* justify the savage colonization of the Congo in the name of progress. At the founding ceremony of the “International Association for the Suppression of Slavery and the Opening Up of Central Africa” in 1876, Leopold claimed that progress would be the goal of his colonial mission: “To open to civilization the only area of our globe to which it has not yet penetrated...constitutes, if I dare to put it in this way, a Crusade worthy of this century of progress” (Ascherson 94). Ten years later, he summons up the word “progress” again to justify his country’s continued presence in Central Africa. In the appendix to Guy Burrows’s sensationalist ethnography of the Congo, *The Land of the Pigmies* (1889), Leopold writes: “To those upholders of manly traditions and pioneers of progress who survive I desire to address some words which my heart dictates to me”
(223). The creation of “fresh means of communications” in the Congo, he continues, “will convey to our progress a more and more rapid and decisive impetus” and will “soon introduce into the vast region of the Congo all the blessings of the Christian civilization.” For Leopold, his emissaries are not colonizers but bearers of progress, his work in the Congo not barbarous but civilizing.

Leopold’s minions and agents whom Marlow meets along the banks of the Congo use “progress” in a similarly misleading way. “One target of Conrad’s critique,” writes Pericles Lewis, “is the extreme optimism of those advocates of progress, like Kurtz, who maintain a sort of mid-Victorian faith in the ultimate triumph of civilized values” (110). The “brickmaker,” for example, calls “the chief of the Inner Station” (i.e., Kurtz) an “emissary of pity and science and progress”—and, Marlow adds, slightly irritated, “devil knows what else” (22). Marlow’s dismissal of the brickmaker’s perverted use of “progress” is evident in his final interjection here. Progress is a floating signifier; it can apparently mean almost anything.

Marlow’s ironic treatment of the agents’ unironic yet loose and misleading use of the term “progress” soon rises to the surface: “There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer (7). “A pioneer of progress” is, strictly speaking, a contradiction in terms. Progress is a development of something else, so it cannot be “pioneered.” What is meant here is an “importer” of progress, an importer of an idea that has the odor of half-thoroughness or oxymoron about it (the

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172 Pericles Lewis credits Ian Watt with this insight. According to Watt, “the general purport of Conrad’s fiction” is “consistent and unequivocal: imperial or colonial experience is disastrous for the whites; it makes them lazy; it reveals their weaknesses; it puffs them up with empty vanity at being white; and it fortifies the intolerable hypocrisy with which Europeans in general conceal their selfish aims” (159).
work being done there, unlike the work being done in the British colonies, is not, according to Marlow, real). It also has the odor of lager-beer about it. And what if that is all that progress really means—all that progress has about it that does not dissolve under even the gentlest kind of analysis—the exportation of a mild, but inhibiting intoxicant to the wider world?

Meanwhile, the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* uses “progress” in a circumscribed, technical sense. He means it as forward movement—a physical advance from point A to point B. While attempting to navigate a river unknown to him, he says, “I would pick out a tree a little way ahead to measure our progress towards Kurtz, but I lost it invariably before we got abreast” (34). Marlow’s progress up the river is, potentially, measurable. For a skilled craftsman familiar with the navigational techniques required to measure a boat’s movement in space, progress is, in fact, discernible. But even this form of potentially quantifiable progress is, in *Heart of Darkness*, unattainable and self-defeating. Marlow cannot keep track of his steamer’s forward movement, because of the strangeness to him of the surrounding landscape—a strangeness which renders its features, to him, indistinguishable. Marlow’s recognition of the difficulty of making any sort of recognizable progress in the Congo, even in the most technical sense, is a tacit

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173 For Conrad, argues Lewis, “England symbolizes both the ideal of efficient, liberal imperialism worshiped by Kurtz’s ‘gang of virtue’ and the sense of common purpose shared by the friends above the Nellie” (212). According to Lewis, the reason Marlow cannot give a rational explanation of his attachment to Kurtz is a version of Conrad’s own irrational subjection to Englishness. “Marlow tells his story in an effort to stave off this darkness by explaining his own behavior in Africa in ethical terms. Yet his inability to give a rational account of his attachment to Kurtz points to the power that Kurtz’s many appeals to England and Englishness have over Marlow. It suggests that Marlow’s ethical framework fails to account adequately for a mysterious ‘hidden some-thing,’ the power of national character that works on Marlow without his realizing it” (213). Kurtz’s “imperfect Englishness” makes him “an extremist in the application of the putatively English values of pity, science, progress, and virtue” (215). For another assessment of Conrad’s “Englishness,” see note 23 in the introduction to this dissertation.
recognition of the inherent difficulty of calculating, let alone pioneering, “advancement” in uncharted waters.  

In the sentence that gives the novel its title, Marlow again uses “progress” in a technical sense, while attaching even more mystery (or unaccountability) to it: “The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz’s life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time” (62). Here progress and Kurtz are invoked in the same breath, but, as above, progress refers only to the movement of Marlow’s riverboat, not to Kurtz’s mission. Further, despite the stubbornly technical deployment of the word, Marlow manages to suffuse it with irony and mystery. For every step forward, Marlow’s boat takes two steps back. His progress up the river is regressive and recurrent rather than progressive.

In fact, the teleological line of the steamboat’s progress is not only delayed and later reduplicated (“bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upwards progress”). It is also contrasted with the starkly non-linear, vertiginous movement of Kurtz’s life (“ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time”). The spiraling movement of the ebb, and the inexorable, infinite picture of time painted here suggest that progress is possible in neither a technical nor an ideological sense. Progress is also denied at the level of syntax. The reduplication of the word “ebbing” in this passage is a literary anadiplosis, a ubiquitous device which spans across

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174 In “ Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative,” Edward Said draws a link between Marlow’s account of the Thames and his role as storyteller. The Thames, suggests Said, is “not a snake fascinating a dumb bird, but a thread leading back to ‘the great spirit of the past...the dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empire’” (117). Conrad’s own efforts, claims Said, “are to employ the power of written words, with their origin in the painstaking craft of writing, in order to make his reader experience the vitality and the dynamism of seen things. Most often, however, this happens through the mediation of spoken words.”
many genres. The word “ebbing” stitches together two clauses through an act of repetition. It welds what was there to what comes after through a rhythmic process of reduplication and incorporative sequencing, rather than through a non-repetitive causal progression. It weaves together ideas in a dialectical and interdependent pattern rather than linearly and teleologically. Syntactically, this passage refutes notions of progress and civilization which seek to reform, contain or “advance” what is other, rather than letting it replicate and reproduce on its own.

The sentence also links progress with death, the ultimate ironic barrier against real or imagined progress. “What became of the hens?” asks Marlow as he passes by an abandoned village. “I don’t know either, I should think the cause of progress got them, anyhow” (62). Progress—at least the progress the Belgian colonizers imagine they bring to the Congo—leads to its direct opposite: destruction and death, the ultimate cessation of movement. It also leads to the destruction of the most basic domestic forms of economy and existence, such as chicken coops. That people’s hens must die for “the cause of progress” to prevail is an ironic revelation, suggesting that the colonial mission of progress leads to local impoverishment and the dissolution of domestic forms of subsistence, despite claiming to be otherwise (“enriching,” “humanizing,” “benefitting”).

Marlow uses language adroitly to show to his readers that he has mastered his craft as seaman and storyteller. The pilgrims’ misunderstanding and mishandling of “progress” is a function of their incompetent handling of language, a linguistic ineptitude which is the byproduct of a concomitant professional ineptitude. That they use “progress” ideologically rather than technically proves they are ideologues rather than technicians; their work in the Congo is not really work, because it corresponds to a grand idea rather than a specific craft or a simple everyday practice. (Had the Belgians promoted themselves as expert hand cutters or efficacious destroyers of native customs,
their accounts of their “work” in the Congo, we suppose, would have been far more informative than any of the official reports they sent back to the mother ship.) By using “progress” in an ironic yet enigmatic sense, Marlow undermines the work being done by Leopold’s pilgrims. He takes liberties with language to illuminate what is obscure rather than to obscure what it purports to illuminate. By making “progress” mean its opposite (death, vertigo, backwardness), Marlow blurs the neat outlines of the agents’ teleology and creates a more complex picture of their colonial mission. The problem with the Belgians’ lax use of the word is not that it’s imaginative or far-fetched, but that it is banally imaginative for the wrong reasons.

By juxtaposing Marlow’s “progress” with the agents’, Conrad highlights the facile banality of the Belgian mission. The fact that Marlow’s boat is cruising the Congo River is fascinating enough. Endowing its physical progress with a layer of ideological matting is superfluous and misleading.

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175 For an interesting account of Kurtz’s report as a naïve yet “official” attempt to paint an ordered picture of that which is, in fact, essentially discordant—and of Marlow’s attempt to mitigate the misinformation and misleading contents of this report through the creation of an “unreadable” and in fact disordered text—see Brooks 1984.
Macondo Unfound

In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the misleading and fantastic schemes of the Belgian enterprise are brought to light when contrasted with Marlow’s devotion to his work and the physicalist understanding of the natural world that this work rests on. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the fantastic elements of the European foundational process and discourse are dementedly brought to life when reenacted by characters stuck in insurmountable local landscapes and situations. The repeated failure of these parodic reenactments reveals the idealistic inclinations and fallacies of what they parody.

The tale of Macondo’s foundation in One Hundred Years of Solitude is a tale of unfulfilled expectations and recurring frustrations. Unlike conventional epics and their novelistic descendants, in which heroes accomplish what they set out to accomplish against all odds, in One Hundred Years of Solitude, heroic foundational plans and aspirations are never fully realized. Rather than conquering unforeseeable obstacles and defeating dangerously seductive distractions to eventually reach a predetermined destination, José Arcadio’s plans mutate to fit awkwardly into pre-existing, instead of desired, circumstances. His various projects are either irreparably (but not dramatically) interrupted or simply forgotten and set aside. His “accomplishments” are therefore determined by digressions and interruptions, rather than by their eventual overcoming. In epic, on the other hand, a hero’s triumph is definite. Those obstacles that impede his triumph leave no palpable trace or lingering influence. Digressions are the narrative form that such obstacles may assume. I will show in this section that García Márquez’s
The apparent ‘novelty’ of marvelous realism,” argues Kumkum Sangari in her essay “The Politics of the Possible,” results from “its immersion in the social matrix wherein improvisation is not merely a formal literary reflex but a function of living in the world” (160). By contrast, continues Sangari, “the synchronic time of the modern and of the post-modern in the West is an end product of the now discredited linear time of modernity and progress” (161). The “digressive romance narrative,” argues David Quint in Epic and Empire, is a “narrative explicitly posed as an alternative to the martial epic and its pursuit of world-empire” (21). The “epic arena” is an escape “from the wonderings of romance desire.” José Arcadio’s pursuit is neither epic nor an escape from epic, but a conflation of the two—his epic pursuits are beset with error and digression. In this novel, the “pleasing variety” generally associated with the romance is not “accommodated” to a “Virgilian epic teleology.” Instead, epic teleology becomes perennially delayed and deluded by romance’s errancy and distraction, subject to the “ever changing winds of circumstance” (9).

This is the ghost of man he killed because he called him a coward during a cockfight. Perhaps it is the ghost, too, of Márquez’s novel before this one, No One Writes to the Colonel—an invitation to chart new literary terrain.

According to David Quint, “Epic indicates its allegiance to the winning side through the shape of its own narrative. The victors’ achievement is restaged by a narrative that steadily advances to reach the ending towards which it has been directed from the beginning” (27). Just as the victors’ ideology “ascribes principles of confusion and disorder to the enemy so that victory over them may be described as a triumph of reason and meaning, the epic narrative projects episodes of suspension and indirection in order that it may overcome them and demonstrate its ultimately teleological form.” When “these episodes expand or multiply to disrupt narrative unity and closure,” continues Quint, “epic may be suspected of going over to the side and perspective of the losers.”
Jose Arcadio decides to settle somewhere else—a pellucid ravine, the de facto setting of a digressive episode in a romance.

In Book VIII of the Aeneid, Aeneas falls asleep on the banks of a river (see Figure 6). In his sleep he sees Tiberinus the god of the Tiber. Tiberinus tells Aeneas that this place by the river is the place in which “the city” will rise: “hic est locus urbus erit, requies ea certa laborum” ‘Here shall be the city’s site, here a sure rest from your toils’ (Virgil 8.47; Rushton 63). This place, continues Tiberinus, will be the future home of Rome. Tiberinus announcement is an overdetermined etiology. It elucidates something known to Virgil’s contemporaries: Rome’s future triumph. “haud incerta cano. nunc qu ratione quod instat expedias victor, paucis (adverte) docebo” ‘Not doubtful is my prophecy. Now in what way you can make your way triumphant throughs this present ill, in few words—pay heed—I will explain’ (Virgil 8.49–50; Rushton 63).179 The Aeneid narrates Aeneas’ feats from a position of total certainty: Aeneas may occasionally falter, but Rome will prevail.

José Arcadio also dreams of a future city while sleeping on the banks of a river. He dreams of a noisy city with houses of mirrored walls which rises up right by the river.180 But this dream subverts the Aeneid’s etiology. His dream does not explain the

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179 Of course, this is a simplistic reading of epic etiology in the Aeneid. For a more thorough investigation of this text, which falls outside the bounds of this dissertation, that reveals a series of complications and repetitions in what appears to be straightforwardly causal etiology, see Beck 57–78.

180 In “Some Types of Mirroring in Literature and Music,” the German critic Michael Von Albrecht discusses Virgil’s use of the technique of literary mirroring. Virgil’s Aeneid uses inversions and reversals to mirror the human psyche. Mirroring, argues Von Albrecht, makes Virgil’s artificial creation seem more natural to his readers: “This is by no means the very reason why Virgil wrote his ingenious anti-narrative, it just explains why his highly artificial text at first sight looks even ‘natural’ to us” (50). José Arcadio’s augury, on the other hand, shows an obliviousness to what a village made of mirrors would actually look like and what its mirrors would reflect. Through ambiguous mirroring and deformed reduplication, García Márquez describes a reality that proclaims itself to be epic, but one that, in effect, can never overcome the elements of romance that delay its fulfillment.
origin of a fait accompli. Instead, the city of his dreams is “rising up” before his eyes. In José Arcadio’s dream, there is no promise of divine protection. Similarly, no one explains to him how this city will come to be (“qua ratione quod instat expediás victor, paucís [adverte] docebo”). When he asks, in his dream, what city is the one that rises before him, he is told it is “Macondo,” a name he has never heard before, but which has a “resonancia sobrenatural” ‘supernatural resonance.’ The name Macondo, unlike Rome, is new to José Arcadio and to those reading about him. It is a name that “resonates” but doesn’t clearly designate. Similarly, we aren’t told who comes up with this name or how and thanks to whom this mirrored city “rises.” All we know is that José Arcadio asked “them” what this city was, and “Macondo” was all “they” responded.

This passage’s subversion of the conventional epic etiology is further complicated by the interweaving of intertextual anecdotes. In this passage we hear not only about José Arcadio’s odd and half-realized foundational aspirations, but also about his son’s future failure to conquer the city of Riohacha. “Años después, durante la segunda guerra civil, el coronel Aureliano Buendía trató de hacer aquella misma ruta para tomarse a Riohacha por sorpresa, y a los seis días de viaje comprendió que era una locura” ‘Years later, during the second civil war, Colonel Aureliano Buendía tried to follow that same route in order to take Riohacha by surprise and after six days of traveling, he understood that it was madness’ (7; 13). It is while camping “beside the river,” that Aureliano realizes that his army of men is not fit to occupy another city, let alone willing to lose their lives in the process. His men, he notices, “tenían un aspecto de náufragos sin escapatoria…y todos estaban dispuestos (y lo consiguieron) a morirse de viejos” ‘had the look of shipwrecked people with no escape...and they were all prepared (and they succeeded) to
die of old age.”¹⁸¹ In this passage, past and future instances of unfilled foundational projects are intertwined, suffusing epic attempts and aspirations with echoes and digressions. These qualities don’t just delay, but repeatedly stymie, the anticipated conquest of other people and places.

Unlike Aeneas, who has no trouble understanding the content of Tiberinus’ prognostications, José Arcadio does not “decipher” his dream until the day he “discovers” ice.¹⁸² This discovery prompts him to think that Macondo’s future houses will be made of ice. Ice reminds him of the mirrored houses that first appeared in the city of his dreams. These houses presage a future Macondo in which ice is used as a construction material, which also keeps the houses cool. José Arcadio’s foundational musings are purely tentative. He uses his present discoveries to reimagine a future city that might be glorious, rather than to explain why a city is already glorious (the Virgilian method discussed above). José Arcadio’s retrospective futurism and imaginative urban proposals break with the nationalistic certainty and propagandistic glorification of the founding epic.¹⁸³

Some years after having founded Macondo, José Arcadio decides to move Macondo to “a better place.” His grand plan is in theory a progressive, enterprising move. José Arcadio wants to put Macondo in contact with “the great inventions.” To do so, he is determined to find a route that will connect it to the sea. His father before him

¹⁸¹ In her Discursos Narrativos de la Conquista de América (1983), the critic Beatriz Pastor defines as a “shipwreck or calamity (fracaso) narratives that question the Spaniard’s conquest ideology” (Quint 391).

¹⁸² For a more thorough investigation of this “discovery,” see the second chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁸³ The “Augustan Regime,” argues David Quint in Epic and Empire, “sought to rewrite the history of its own rise to power” (62). As “part of this propaganda, the Aeneid rewrites Roman history ever more radically, placing the origins that legitimate Augustan rule farther and farther back in time, beyond history to prehistory.”

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had attempted a similar feat and failed—he could not find the sea via the “Eastern Route.” Taking his father’s failure into account, José Arcadio decides that the “Eastern route” can “only lead to the past,” and is determined to take the “Northern Route” to the sea instead: “[The Eastern Route] era, pues, una ruta que no le interesaba, porque podia conducirlo al pasado” ‘It was, therefore, a route that did not interest him, for it could lead only to the past’ (9; 19). José Arcadio’s refutation of the past ends up being its invocation. His determination to take an alternative route is not informed by any particular knowledge of the terrain he will visit, but by an impulse to correct anecdotal evidence. But José Arcadio’s goal, like his father’s, is never realized. He replicates his father’s own failure by attempting to avoid it—his initiative crumbles, and results in cyclical regression rather than progress or any sort of northward advancement.

José Arcadio’s “progressive” enterprise begins as a potentially teleological endeavor but ends up being a tangled “web of pretexts” and “evasions.” “José Arcadio Buendía no supo en qué momento, ni en virtud de qué fuerzas adversas, sus planes se fueron enredando en una maraña de pretextos, contratiempos y evasivas, hasta convertirse en pura y simple ilusión” ‘José Arcadio Buendía did not know at what moment or because of what adverse forces his plan had become enveloped in a web of pretexts, disappointments, and evasions until it turned into nothing but an illusion’ (16; 22). This tangled web of unforeseen obstacles eventually becomes its own sort of literary fabric. A “maraña” is literally a tangled mess of indiscriminate threads and hairs. Figuratively it is a description of a sticky situation. By entangling José Arcadio’s epic aspirations in an inescapable mesh of evasions and contretemps, One Hundred Years of Solitude narrates the story of Macondo’s origin—a series of disconnected and repetitive improvisation and reinterpretations.
José Arcadio’s blueprint for a “peninsular Macondo” is realized only in discourse, which is ideal, magical and repetitive. When Úrsula refuses to participate in her husband’s relocation scheme, he tries to convince her of its virtues with enchanting language:

José Arcadio Buendía no creyó que fuera tan rígida la voluntad de su mujer. Trató de seducirla con el hechizo de su fantasía, con la promesa de un mundo prodigioso donde bastaba con echar unos líquidos mágicos en la tierra para que las plantas dieran frutos a voluntad del hombre, y donde se vendían a precio de baratillo toda clase de aparatos para el dolor. (31)

José Arcadio Buendía had not thought that his wife’s will was so firm. He tried to seduce her with the charm of his fantasy, with the promise of a prodigious world where all one had to do was sprinkle some magic liquid on the ground and the plants would bear fruit whenever a man wished, and where all manner of instruments against pain were sold at bargain prices. (23)

José Arcadio tries to break his wife’s “firm will” with the “charm of his fantasy.” Interestingly enough, his fantastic promises are more predictive of Macondo’s future than his previous foundational aspirations. A charming and magical place, in which plants bear fruit at man’s bidding and quack cures are sold at bargain prices, is remarkably similar to what Macondo ends up becoming.¹⁸⁴

José Arcadio’s foundational aspirations unsuccessfully replicate Spain’s establishment of a colonial order in Latin America. His epic dreams of settling foreign

¹⁸⁴ Cyclical patterns of illusion and necessity are repeated in One Hundred Years of Solitude. Consider, for example, recurring attempts to decipher Melquíades’s manuscripts, to win a civil war, and to make Macondo economically viable. In her analysis of One Hundred Years of Solitude as a gothic novel along the lines of Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights and Dracula, Claudette Kemper Columbus claims that García Márquez’s flagship novel exhibits all the classical traits of a “Gothic double-bind”: “reasoned means invoked to demonstrate the reality of the human situation reify the possibility that human beings are abstractions, departures, repetitive relational geometries, mystifyingly encoded commodities” (406).

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lands exist in his imagination before they are realized—which is true about the epic dreams of the Spaniards. The difference is that José Arcadio’s plans are never, in fact, carried out. Latin American cities, argues the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama in his seminal book *The Lettered City* (1984), existed on paper before they existed in practice. To prevent potential disorder in its colonies, the Spanish Crown needed to establish order before anything else: “el orden debe quedar estatuido antes de que la ciudad exista...” ‘Before anything may be built, the city must be imagined’ (21; 6; my emphasis). Latin American cities thus needed to exist symbolically before they could exist actually. “Una ciudad, previamente a su aparición en la realidad, debía existir en una representación simbólica que obviamente solo podían asegurar los signos: las palabras, que traducían la voluntad de edificarla en aplicación de normas” ‘Before their appearance as material entities, cities had to be constructed as symbolic representations. Therefore the permanence of the whole depended on the immutability of the signs themselves—on the words that transmitted the will to build the city in accordance with the stipulated norms.’ According to Rama, norms, laws and other linguistic contortions were used to guarantee Spain’s ownership of its colonies’ soil, in flagrant disregard of local ownership and uses of land. Rama considers this process of ordering a sort of magic, which eventually served to devalue local parlance and systems of governance. “Aunque se siguió aplicando un ritual de magia para asegurar la posesión del suelo, las ordenanzas reclamaron la participación de un script para redactar una escritura” ‘The conquerors still asserted territorial claims through rituals impregnated with magic, but now they required a writer of some sort (a scribe, a notary, a chronicler) to cast their foundational acts in the form of imperishable signs” (21; 6; my emphasis).

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185 All translations of Rama’s *La ciudad letrada* are taken from John Charles Chasteen’s 1996 English translation of the text.
Language, argues Rama in *The Lettered City*, has long been used by Latin American elites to alienate non-elites. The written word that magically guaranteed Spain custody of its colonies became the only potent one in Latin America, as the vernacular was repudiated: “Esta palabra escrita viviría en América Latina como la única valedera, en oposición a la palabra hablada que pertenecía al reino de lo inseguro y lo precario” ‘In Latin America, the written word became the only binding one—in contradistinction to the spoken word, which belonged to the realm of things precarious and uncertain’ (22; 7). In the linguistic behaviors of Latin Americans, two languages remain sharply divided: one public and bureaucratic, the other popular and quotidian, used among citizens in their private lives and in their everyday social relations. The “spoken word,” although common, is marginal and precarious.

The hermetic property of legalese, or lettered language, is alluded to many times in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In Chapter 9, six lawyers looking for Colonel Aureliano Buendía appear in Úrsula’s house in Macondo. These lawyers spend most of their time there “encerrados en el dormitorio en conciliábulos herméticos” ‘They spent the greater part of the day closeted in the bedroom in hermetic conferences.”’ The lawyer’s retreat from the world functions as a physical metaphor for their language, which is accessible to no one but them. The phrase “conciliábulos herméticos,” which describes the six assembled lawyers’ action and location, is also descriptive of their hermetic language. The use of obscure words in this passage—“conciliábulo,” “hermético,” and “levita”—reinforces the hermeticism of legalistic language. The word “conciliáculo” is a late Latin term meant to mock legalese, and that sense of mockery survives into 20th-century Spanish. It is a little place for false lawyers to confabulate, a little illegitimate place. But it sounds fancy to the unschooled ear. This is the sense of the
word here, which is entirely consistent with Rama’s thesis about lettered language and obfuscation.

The obfuscating nature of Latin American legalese, despite its pretense at technical dispassion, is also highlighted in Chapter 7 of One Hundred Years of Solitude. Here, a horde of capital city lawyers dressed in black, leaves the presidential palace “en el hielo de la madrugada” ‘the icy cold of early morning,’ with their coats pulled up around their ears (57; 70). This image suggests their deafness to the world they live in and legislate. The lawyers congregate in coffeeshops, “para especular sobre lo que quiso decir el presidente cuando dijo que sí, o lo que quiso decir cuando dijo que no, y para suponer inclusive lo que el presidente estaba pensando cuando dijo una cosa enteramente distinta’ ‘to speculate over what the president had meant when he said yes, or what he had meant when he said no, and even to imagine what the president was thinking when he said something quite different’ (58; 71). Their need to speculate over the actual meaning of the president’s pronouncements shows how the language of the lettered class is not used to create meaning so much as to delineate class boundaries.

It is when José Arcadio bridges lettered and vernacular forms of speaking and legislating that he is most successful as his town’s leader. When the time comes to settle Macondo, José Arcadio, like the Spaniards before him, parcels out the land. However, he does not arrogate it to himself or his followers arbitrarily, nor does he justify this violent arrogation with abstruse legalistic parlance. Instead, he simply distributes it equally amongst its citizens. His act responds to his town’s everyday life and a basic idea of justice, born of practical experience.

Fascinado por una realidad inmediata que entonces le resultó más fantástica que el vasto universo de su imaginación, perdió todo interés por el laboratorio de alquimia, puso a descansar la materia extenuada por largos meses de manipulación, y volvió a ser el hombre emprendedor de los primeros tiempos
que decidía el trazado de las calles y la posición de las nuevas casas, de manera que nadie disfrutara de privilegios que no tuvieran todos. (18)

Fascinated by an immediate reality that came to be more fantastic than the vast universe of his imagination, he lost all interest in the alchemist’s laboratory, put to rest the material that had become attenuated with months of manipulation, and went back to being the enterprising man of earlier days when he had decided upon the layout of the streets and the location of the new houses so that no one would enjoy privileges that everyone did not have. (25)

José Arcadio’s “ordering” of his town results from his fascination with his town’s “immediate reality” and is, in this sense, opposed to Rama’s account of the Spaniard’s “magical” methods. José Arcadio’s fascination with “an immediate reality” leads to a pragmatic sense of order that seems ideal but is grounded in the practical—the perceivable and the achievable. The colonizer’s ordering of a distant reality leads instead to a compulsive fascination with order which ostracizes the vernacular. José Arcadio’s projects take place alongside his alchemical experiments. It is after laying to rest “material that had become attenuated with months of manipulation” that José Arcadio decides to focus on Macondo’s everyday reality. This presupposes that the equal parceling of land in towns similar to Macondo is idealistic not because it insists on equality, but because it is able to legislate itself according to its own vernacular experience of the world.

José Arcadio’s most arbitrary act, as organizer of the new town, is to plant almond tress rather than acacias. There is something magical about this act, but it is not its arbitrariness—it is the trees’ ability to defy time, an ability that could be merely natural, but that José Arcadio calls alchemical. “Fue también José Arcadio Buendía quien decidió por esos años que en las calles del pueblo se sembraran almendros en vez de acacias, y quien descubrió sin revelarlos nunca los métodos para hacerlos eternos.”
was also José Arcadio Buendía who decided during those years that they should plant almond trees instead of acacias on the streets, and who discovered, without ever revealing it, a way to make them live forever’ (8; 11). José Arcadio’s whimsical initiative, combined with his alchemical expertise, is the key to a lasting policy sustained through a peaceful and natural process of reproduction, rather than abrupt, obscure and violent enforcement.186

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* García Márquez situates a city’s founding in the context of romance-like errancy instead of epic, novelistic heroism. José Arcadio’s dream explains Macondo’s origins. Macondo does not result from a traditionally epic feat or struggle, but from an improvisational, carefree impulse: to lay aside what is initially sought and put whatever else comes up in its stead. This vernacular substitution leads to a particular form of enchantment reflective of local resourcefulness. José Arcadio’s dream also reflects a new type of literature—literature able to tell the story not of an eternal city like Rome, but of an ephemeral, post-colonial, provincial, enchanting dunghill like Macondo. In this hybrid, subversive form of narration, epic aspirations go unrealized and digressive episodes and vernacular interruptions become the fount of new narrative methods and possibilities.

186 For a more thorough discussion of the relation between craft and knowledge, alchemy and regeneration, see chapter 3 of this dissertation.
Part 2. Enchantment Marred or Mended

Ephemeral Independence in No One Writes to the Colonel

The action of No One Writes to the Colonel takes place during identifiable moments in the history of the world. The novella is set in a postcolonial society rent asunder by civil conflict and extractive enterprises directed from abroad. It also takes place in an abstract, cyclical time outside of or immune to historical time. Episodes do not result from prior episodes causally; instead, they follow an aleatory logic of recurrence. This hybrid mode of experiencing and narrating time fuses and inverts the traditional chronotopes of the adventure romance and the realistic novel as posited by Mikhail Bakhtin in his Discourse in the Novel. In this novella, there is a limited correspondence between specificity and flexibility—worlds may be concrete and definite, while also being subject to recurrence and randomness. In No One Writes to the Colonel, time possess its own cyclical rhythm, but the reason behind its cyclicity is, paradoxically, its tyrannical, unreliable quality.

In some key respects, the chronotope of No One Writes to the Colonel resembles the chronotope of Greek romance. According to Bakhtin, in the chronotope of Greek romance, “persons are forever having things happen to them...a purely adventuristic person is a person of chance. He enters adventuristic time as a person to whom something happens” (95). But the initiative in this time “does not belong” to human beings. Similarly, in the Colonel’s life, all initiative and power belong to chance, randomness or the incontestable demands of utter necessity. The colonel is constantly determined to act, but when the time comes to take decisive action, he falters, waiting instead for his expected deliverance.
The Colonel’s grand scheme to make money at the cockpit is indefinitely postponed. The repeated, frivolous postponement of his aspiration becomes his family’s reality. Worried about their future, the colonel’s wife asks him: “Y mientras tanto qué comemos” ‘Meanwhile what will we eat?’ to which the colonel responds: “Mierda” ‘Shit’ (120; 144). Shit, we suppose, is what they have been eating for the past forty years. The English critic William Rowe notes that the questions of survival and material lack are brought to the fore “in the very first scene” of the novel, in which, he writes, “the Colonel scrapes the coffee tin for the last rusty scraps, an action which is echoed later when his wife boils stones in the saucepan to prevent people suspecting they have nothing to eat” (384).

The laws that in fact govern “the sociopolitical and everyday life” of the colonel’s life “are foreign” and unknown to him—theoretical notions of legal merit and institutional protection and reliability (Bakhtin 101). The colonel, despite believing in a dependable political and institutional world—the world which will theoretically deliver to him the pension it promised him—experiences only contingency and the unexpected after-effects of unfulfilled policies. Despite being born in a specific time and place, there is nothing the colonel can do of his own accord to determine his course of action.

Although the Colonel’s world is unpredictable and abstract, it is also marked by particular details that fix it in historical time. In the novel historical time is repetitive and undifferentiated, but also specific and concrete. The chronotope of No One Writes to the Colonel contains plenty of what Bakhtin has called “indications of historical time” and “identifying traces” of an era: “Durante cincuenta y seis años—desde cuando terminó la guerra civil—el coronel no había hecho nada distinto de esperar” ‘For nearly sixty years—
since the end of the last civil war— the colonel had done nothing else but wait’ (12; 17).\textsuperscript{187} We know exactly the number of years the Colonel has been waiting for his pension and we obtain minute descriptions of what he does while he waits. Yet—considering that the Colombian civil war has never exactly ended—García Márquez’s extreme specificity is ironic.\textsuperscript{188} His numerous ciphers are not informative, they are merely performative.

Government institutions are described in painstakingly specific language. “Piense usted” says the lawyer to the Colonel, “que ha habido siete presidentes y que cada presidente cambió por lo menos diez veces su gabinete y que cada ministro cambió sus empleados por lo menos cien veces” ‘there have been seven presidents, and each president changed his cabinet at least ten times, and each minister changed his staff at least a hundred times’ (34; 43). The lawyer’s account of the shifts in the country’s central government is numerically precise and detailed. However, this hyper-specificity signals the government’s variability and unaccountability, rather than informed self-governance. It is the dramatic manifestation of a tendency to paper over chaos with superficial and theoretical notions of precision and order—without, in effect, having the means or the technical know-how to redress these specific problems.

After his fruitless meeting with his lawyer, the Colonel decides to write a letter to the government to inquire about the status of his pension. The account of the writing of the letter and its contents is both meticulously specific and bafflingly vague:

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\textsuperscript{187}The original sentence is more precise than its English translation—the colonel has waited for “fifty-six,” rather than “nearly sixty,” years.

\textsuperscript{188} We could consider this a form of historical irony, whereby the audience knows what has happened, but the actors do not or seem not to.
Llevó a la mesita de la sala un bloc de papel rayado, la pluma, el tintero y una hoja de papel secante, y dejó abierta la puerta del cuarto por si tenía que consultar algo con su mujer. Ella rezó el rosario.

—¿A cómo estamos hoy?

—27 de octubre. Escribió con una compostura aplicada, puesta la mano con la pluma en la hoja de papel secante, recta la columna vertebral para favorecer la respiración, como le enseñaron en la escuela. El calor se hizo insoportable en la sala cerrada.


—¿Qué día me incluyeron en el escalafón? La mujer no interrumpió la oración para pensar.

—12 de agosto de 1949.

Un momento después empezó a llover. El coronel llenó una hoja de garabatos grandes, un poco infantiles, los mismos que le enseñaron en la escuela pública de Manaure. Luego una segunda hoja hasta la mitad, y firmó. (45)

He took a pad of lined paper, the pen, the inkwell, and a blotter to the little table in the living room, and left the bedroom door open in case he had to ask his wife anything. She was saying her prayers.

‘What’s today’s date?’

‘October 27th.’

He wrote with a studious neatness, the hand that held the pen resting on the blotter, his spine straight to ease his breathing, as he’d been taught in school. The heat became unbearable in the closed living room. A drop of perspiration fell on the letter. The colonel picked it up on the blotter. Then he tried to erase the letters which had smeared but he smudged them. He didn’t lose his patience. He wrote an asterisk and noted in the margin, ‘acquired rights.’ Then he read the whole paragraph.

‘When was I put on the rolls?’

The woman didn’t interrupt her prayer to think.

‘August 12, 1949.’

A moment later it began to rain. The colonel filled a page with large doodling’s which were a little childish, the same ones he learned in public school at Manaure. Then he wrote on a second sheet down to the middle, and he signed it. (56)
This passage contains a comprehensive list of the objects the Colonel will use to write his letter: a pad of lined paper, a pen, an inkwell, a blotter, a table. It mentions when and where his writing takes place—the Colonel’s house, October 27—and when his pension was first promised to him: August 12, 1949. The passage also mentions where the Colonel went to school (la escuela pública de Manaure); what his wife is doing while he writes (praying); how long his letter is (a page and a half); and what the weather is like. But, despite the abundance of detail, the passage contains a few key omissions. We are not told what the letter says. We know only that the phrase “acquired rights” is written in the margin, and that it is signed. Its content is not only undisclosed, it is quite deliberately blurred. The Colonel’s sweat falls on his writing and dissolves it. When he attempts to rewrite it, he makes it even blurrer (“pero hizo un borrón”). His cursive is artless and bulky—making the letter’s official content a page full of awkward scribbles.189

Most importantly, the letter’s addressee is never disclosed. This omission is, I propose, deliberate. It is intended to point to an institutional void and to remind us that,

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189 In her monograph, *Writing on the Plaza: Mediated literacy practice amongst scribes and clients in Mexico City* (1992)—a survey of the functions and purposes of the written word in the Santo Domingo Plaza—the Hungarian-Mexican critic Judith Kalman argues that, for the people on the plaza, the written word can function as a sort of magic word that grants access to social spheres which are otherwise inaccessible: “Pensaban que los documentos escritos que necesitaban les permitían participar en ciertas esferas sociales a las que no les daba acceso el lenguaje oral” they thought that the written documents they needed, allowed them to participate in certain social spheres to which oral language did not give them access (90; my translation). The citizens also thought, continues Kalman, that the written word lent “veracity” and “credibility” to their petitions. It allowed them to prove and demonstrate things that could not be proven or demonstrated by oral means. Kalman argues that it is through written documents that societies project an image of themselves to themselves, and that they serve as a source of what Pierre Bourdieu would call “prestige.” “The way we use writing, like the way we dress, she argues, is part of our “social semiotic.” “La apariencia de nuestra escritura” ‘The appearance of our writing’ continues Kalman, “es tan importante como nuestra ropa. Lo escrito a mano es feo y vergonzoso, no por que no incluya un mensaje sino porque, igual que la ropa remendada y los trajes pasados de moda, revela algo sobre quien la usa” is as important as our clothing. The handwritten word is ugly and embarrassing, not because it doesn’t include a message but because, like patched clothing and old-fashioned outfits, it reveals something about the person who wears it. The Colonel’s clothes, as well as his writing, are patchy, puerile and improvised.
there is no actual entity the Colonel can direct his letter to. This Kafkaesque omission baffles the novella’s readers, as the lack of institutional support baffles the Colonel. The Colonel’s letter is like a message in a bottle—whether it will or will not reach someone and whether someone will or will not write back is unknowable: “No esperaba nada —mintió. Volvió hacia el médico una mirada enteramente infantil—. Yo no tengo quien me escriba” ‘I wasn’t expecting anything,’ he lied. He turned to the doctor with an entirely childish look. ‘No one writes to me.’ But the fact that his letter will most likely go unanswered lets the Colonel play freely and imaginatively with its content.

The variability and skimpiness of external institutions gives the Colonel the freedom to write inventively—which, we presume, reflects the sort of freedom García Márquez experienced as a Colombian writer himself. Literary creativity, in this case, is the fruit of absence—a very particular sort of absence which papers over its underlying insubstantiality with out-of-place, officious language.

In *No One Writes to the Colonel*, there is a limited correlation between specificity and flexibility, as there would be in either a purely realistic chronotope or a purely adventurous one. Specificity renders the Colonel both free and unfree. Waiting for his pension gives his life routine and stability even if, in this case, stability is the handmaiden of uncertainty. Vagueness and imprecision are the impetus for stasis rather than adventure. Stasis, in turn, is both freeing and constricting, repetitive and unpredictable. The Colonel often feels stuck in a timeless, spaceless substance: “cayó

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199 Critical comparisons between Gabriel García Márquez and Franz Kafka are abundant. When asked when he started to write fiction, García Márquez told the *Paris Review* that it was after he *read The Metamorphosis*. According to William Rowe, “the idea of an endlessly repeated chain of people waiting for something which fails to arrive”—an idea that is played with in *No One Writes to the Colonel*—“sounds like something in Kafka” (383). According to Sam Jordison, the first line of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reads like the first line of *The Metamorphosis*. 
hasta el fondo de una substancia sin tiempo y sin espacio” ‘He fell to the bottom of a substance without time and without space’ (91; 69). This feeling of timelessness is related to his experience of helplessness. Moments in time leave no memorable traces, in large part because of how time-bound he is. In one sense, the Colonel continues to wait for his pension because he lives outside history, “al coronel le pareció que el tiempo no había transcurrido” ‘again, it didn’t seem to the colonel as if any time had passed at all’ (87; 65). In another sense, he continues to wait for his pension because he cannot escape history. “Desde hace mucho tiempo el pueblo yacía en una especie de sopor, estragado por diez años de historia” ‘For a long time the town had lain in a sort of stupor, ravaged by ten years of history’ (84; 62). History has rendered his town and his experience history-less, stupefied.

The Colonel’s town has been in a state of siege since time immemorial. The state of siege has become so routine that the Colonel even forgets that it is in place: “siempre se me olvida que estamos en estado de sitio” ‘I always forget that we are under martial law,’ he tells his wife (15; 8). Ironically, the state of siege (or emergency) is one of the few reliable and permanent governmental institutions in the Colonel’s town, and the country at large. The curfew has become so routine that the Colonel uses it to keep time: “a las once sonó el clarín del toque de queda. El coronel concluyó la lectura media hora más tarde...cuando sonó el toque de queda puso el reloj en las once” ‘At eleven the trumpet blew curfew. The colonel finished his reading a half-hour later’ (22; 24).101 In his article

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101 The regularity of the curfew puts us in mind of Giorgio Agamben’s 2003 text, *State of Exception*. According to Agamben, “in every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference” (40). One might assume that a state of emergency is declared in response to “an emergency”—a referent. However, this declaration is more arbitrary than that: a state of emergency is declared for no reason other than the declaration itself—a manifestation of a government’s ability to declare “exceptionality.”
“Resources for Survival: No One Writes to the Colonel,” Rowe argues that the regularity of the “curfew bugle” is yet another example of “the insidious penetration of tyranny into the rhythm of everyday existence” (383).

The zealous pursuit of money revolts the Colonel and makes him into a creature both in and out of time. The Colonel would rather starve than sell his dead son’s rooster or his antique clock. In like manner, he leaves Macondo the second it seems to become economically viable and historically relevant (a viability and relevancy which prove to be very short-lived):

En el sopor de la siesta vio llegar un tren amarillo y polvoriento con hombres y mujeres y animales asfixiándose de calor, amontonados hasta en el techo de los vagones. Era la fiebre del banano. En veinticuatro horas transformaron el pueblo.

-Me voy-, dijo entonces el coronel. -El olor del banano me descompone los intestinos. - Y abandonó a Macondo en el tren de regreso, el miércoles veintisiete de junio de mil novecientos seis a las dos y dieciocho minutos de la tarde. (22)

In the drowsiness of the siesta he saw a yellow, dusty train pull in, with men and women and animals suffocating from the heat, piled up even on the roofs of the cars. It was the banana fever.

In twenty-four hours they had transformed the town. ‘I’m leaving,’ the colonel said then. ‘The odor of the banana is eating at my insides.’ And he left Macondo on the return train, Wednesday, June 27, 1906 at 2:18 p.m. (47)

Before the “banana fever,” Macondo was a sleepy town inured to the passage of time. The banana bonanza transforms the town into a source of monetary profit and, potentially, historical relevance. It also brings the town into the fold of world-historical time. The

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Colombia was in a state of siege from 1886 to 1991—that is, 105 years. The state of siege was established in order to give the Colombian government greater leeway in “control[ling] subversive factions.” But it also facilitated systematic violations of human rights that otherwise might have been protected by the application of the law. See Palacio 189.
town is transformed by the migrants, claims the narrator, in exactly twenty-four hours. And it is this transformation that impels the Colonel to leave on “Wednesday, June 27, 1906 at 2.18 p.m.” The Colonel’s departure is described to the minute. Yet it marks his withdrawal from—rather than his participation in—the historical and the progressive.

Censorship and arbitrary governance further validate the colonel’s seemingly absurd behavior. When reality-registering institutions such as newspapers and elections (in the Colonel’s town, “there’s no hope for elections”) become whimsical, corrupt, or absent, it might not make sense to think of history and politics in terms of merit. In the town’s tailor shop, tacked up over a guitar is a sign that reads: TALKING POLITICS FORBIDDEN. This sign is baffling in several respects. Obviously, it is itself a political act, which paradoxically inhibits other political acts. It gives no indication of what “talking politics” may be, which potentially makes the sign a prohibition of talking in general, or an invitation to speak abstrusely—an abstruseness that belies the imperative simplicity apparently contained in it. The sign does not prohibit any act in particular, but grants itself the right to punish whatever form of communication it deems “political.” Ironically, the surreptitious exchange of political news takes place under this very sign—rendering the prohibition, if not entirely futile, then certainly dysfunctional. News is exchanged here, but surreptitiously so. At the tailor’s shop the colonel receives “hojas clandestinas” ‘clandestine pages’ that contain censored “information”: “Revelaciones sobre el estado de la resistencia armada en el interior del país” ‘Revelations about the state of armed resistance in the interior of the country” (3; 15) Although these sheets contravene the sign’s edict, they are still subject to it: the colonel’s son is killed for distributing clandestine information at the town’s cockpit.
In the tailor’s shop conversations revolve around cockfighting. The men gathered there talk openly about the Colonel’s rooster, which he inherited from his son Agustín after he was killed. “Los compañeros de Agustín —oficiales de sastrería, como lo fue él, y fanáticos de la gallera— aprovecharon la ocasión para examinar el gallo.” ‘Agustín’s friends—officials of the tailor shop, as he had been, and cockfight fanatics—took advantage of the occasion to examine the rooster’ (10; 15; my emphasis). Talking about fighting cocks is a lowdown, quotidian distraction from the sign’s distant and theoretical proclamation—Agustín’s friends are the de facto “officials” at the tailor shop. It is also a subtle subversion of these proclamations. The cockpits are places of trouble and danger (most of Colombia’s cockpits are clandestine and unofficial). Cockfighting possesses its own internal, albeit informal, unofficial logic. Unlike political and ideological discourses that censor and oversimplify, the vernacular practice of cockfighting is a form of folk entertainment. According to Clifford Geertz: “cocks are symbolic expressions or magnifications of their owner’s self” (6). Cock-fighting, however, is a ritualistic practice—a public “expression of man’s animality” (Geertz 6). Cockfighting is paradoxically public and intimate, popular and clandestine, humanistic and animalistic. Talk about cocks at the tailor’s shop undercuts the sanctimony of the official sign and the order it pretends to manifest.

192 According to James Boon, cockfights “were presented as ‘entertainment’ as far back as ancient Greece at the foot of the Acropolis” (449).

193 News of dismantled clandestine cockpits are common in the Colombian press. A quick online search reveals more than ten reports of this sort in just the past year. January 2021, El Tiempo: “Sorprenden a 120 personas en una gallera clandestina de Barranquilla” ‘120 people are surprised in a clandestine cockpit in Barranquilla’; November 2020, El Heraldo: “Policía desarma gallera clandestina en Puerto Colombia” ‘Police dismantle clandestine cockpit in Puerto Colombia’; September 2021, El Comercio: “Al menos seis muertos en masacre gallera del sureste de colombia” ‘At least six die in cockpit massacre in South East Colombia’; September 2020, Capital: “Cierran una gallera en Bogotá por incumplimiento de medidas sanitarias” ‘Cockpit closed in Bogotá for failure to meet stipulated sanitary precautions.’ See Figure 8.
In *No One Writes to the Colonel*, official newspapers publish distracting stories, such as articles about the nationalization of the Suez Canal—a story that’s potentially relevant to life in the Colonel’s town, but only tangentially: “El coronel leyó los titulares destacados. Noticias internacionales. Arriba, a cuatro columnas, una crónica sobre la nacionalización del canal de Suez” “The colonel read the main headlines. International news. At the top, across four columns, a report on the Suez Canal” (9; 18). Later in the novel, the story of the Suez Canal is still circulating in town: “El médico abrió los periódicos. —Todavía el problema de Suez —dijo, leyendo los titulares destacados—. El occidente pierde terreno” ‘Still the problem with Suez,’ he said, reading the main headlines. ‘The West is losing ground’ (29; 36). 194 In another instance, we are told that the newspaper’s front page “estaba casi completamente ocupada por las invitaciones a un entierro” ‘was almost completely covered by paid funeral announcements’ (12; 16). Oddly enough, the opening pages of the novel are themselves permeated with allusions to a burial. The front-page news emerges as a mirror image of the novel itself—further contributing to the works’ dizzying logic of recurrence and circularity (see Figure 7). In the world of *No One Writes to the Colonel* information is neither novel nor official but clandestine and circuitous.195

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194 Rowe argues that the Suez in some way hampers the telling of local stories: “The local newspapers only carry news of the metropolitan countries and thus deny and make unreal the local reality” (Rowe, 383).

The nationalization of the Suez Canal took place in October of 1956, the same year that García Márquez left Colombia for Mexico. He was forced to leave under pressure from the dictatorship because he had published a true—and relevant—local story in one of the national newspapers of record.

195 In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “information” about the whereabouts of the Colonel Aureliano Buendía is equally repetitive and irrelevant. “Informaciones simultáneas y contradictorias lo declaraban victorioso en Villanueva, derrotado en Guacamaya, devorado por los indios Motilones, muerto en una aldea de la ciénaga y otra vez sublevado en Urumita” ‘Simultaneous and contradictory information declared him victorious in Villanueva, defeated in Guacamayal, devoured by Motilon Indians, dead in a village in the swamp, and up in arms again in Urumita’ (167; 154).
No discernible pattern emerges from official or unofficial sources of news in the Colonel’s town: “Diez años de informaciones clandestinas no le habían enseñado que ninguna noticia era más sorprendente que la del mes entrante” ‘Ten years of clandestine reports had not taught him that no news was more surprising than next month’s news’ (25; 27). There is no deductive or causal link the Colonel can draw between recorded events. Next week’s news is as surprising as this week’s. The link is, instead, mimetic. The future will imitate the past in at least one sense: it will be equally unpredictable. This relationship of imitation or mimesis makes establishing a more empirical kind of logic futile—or, if not futile, certainly confusing.

If time is not precisely linear, then it cannot be boxed up and commodified. A distorted, magical form of capitalism and its principles prevails in the Colonel’s town. The Colonel, for example, cannot exchange his clock for money. He makes several unsuccessful attempts at selling it. Following his wife’s advice, he decides to sell it to Álvaro, the local tailor. In the tailor’s workshop, however, he changes his mind and lies about why he has the clock with him. He says he has brought the clock to have it repaired rather than to sell it: “—Nada —mintió—. Que le llevo el reloj al alemán para que me lo componga” ‘Nothing,’ he lied. ‘I’m taking my clock to the German to have him fix it for me”(50; 23). When he tries to sell his clock again, he fails to find any buyers. He tells his wife no one wants his clock because there are other, more modern ones, to be had: “a nadie le interesa porque están vendiendo a plazos unos relojes modernos con números

196 Notable here is the deployment of the double negative, “ten years...” “had not taught him that no news was...” The double negative confuses the sentence, further reinforcing the temporal circularity associated with the dissemination of news in the colonel’s world.

197 E. P. Thompson, in his seminal essay, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” argues that the imposition of the clock on workers is what made them into modern subjects, predictable and usable in shifts. The irony here is that Macondo is preindustrial and remains so. The clocks don’t make peasants into workers, but rather institute a false work discipline that leads to more of the same.
luminosos. Se puede ver la hora en la oscuridad” “No one is interested because they’re selling modern clocks with luminous numbers on the installment plan. You can see the time in the dark’ (50; 66). The Colonel’s failure to sell his clock is a marker of the uselessness of clock time in his village— the kind of time normally used to measure and reward labor. It is also a sign of the Colonel’s odd sentimentalism—his refusal to exchange beloved objects for money.

\[198\] Why is time that is visible at dark more valuable than time that isn’t? This question remains unanswered. Any possible response only further mystifies what is already mystifying.
For the Colonel, time is not money but its exact opposite (the Colonel waits for his pension). If the Colonel remains oblivious to time, then he also remains oblivious to causality and by extension to teleological and historical narratives—given that causality depends on temporal succession, on cause being prior to effect. A world without causality is, by definition, a world in which haphazardness and magic thrive.

According to the Colonel’s lawyer, the only reason the colonel has a pension in the first place is luck: “No todos tuvieron la suerte de usted que fue coronel a los veinte años” ‘Not everybody was as lucky as you to be a colonel at twenty’ [when such pensions were being promised by the government] (37; 25). There is a hint of ludicrousness and corruption here. Being a colonel at twenty and surviving a bloody civil war would be extremely good luck, except it isn’t. Corruption is, in a sense, bureaucracy manifested as a phenomenon of chance—as luck, or bad luck, depending on where you stand.

The lawyer deflects the Colonel’s inquiry about his promised pension by hearkening to its origins—the colonel was lucky to have a pension promised to him in the first place. But the Colonel is not lucky because he was promised a pension, he is lucky—absolutely luck-bound—because he lives his life according to the potential arrival of this pension—an arrival which to the colonel appears to be a fulfillment of a bureaucratic promise, but may in fact merely be. Ultimately, whether or not the pension will arrive has nothing to do with the fulfillment of a rational expectation.

The “very graphic description of the administrative ins and outs” promised by the lawyer at the beginning of this passage is never delivered. This lacuna obliges readers to feel the obfuscations of the lawyer’s legalese. It also makes it impossible for us as readers, as it is for the Colonel, to hold the lawyer accountable. It becomes clear that the
Colonel cannot learn anything about his pension from what the lawyer says. The only information the Colonel gleans from his parley with the lawyer is “graphic”—his view of the lawyer’s autumnal butt cheeks, which spill over the edges of his chair. But this image, evocative as it may be, is not illustrative of anything that will cause the pension to be paid out. It is just one more distracting detail—although an evocative graphic of flesh.

When his wife inquires as to the whereabouts of his pension (a question asked repeatedly throughout the novella), the Colonel responds that their turn, number 1823, still has not come up. “Hay que esperar el turno – dijo. Nuestro número es el mil ochocientos veintitrés” “We have to wait our turn,’ he said. ‘Our number is 1823” (27; 23). His wife doubts their turn will ever come up—this number, she claims, is more likely to come up in the lottery than in the pension file: “Desde que estamos esperando, ese número ha salido dos veces en la lotería, replicó la mujer” ‘Since we’ve been waiting, that number has come up twice in the lottery,’ his wife replied.’

The lawyer’s excess flesh is an image of his language’s catachresis—the arbitrary, indecipherable connection between the words he utters and their meaning.

The Colonel only obtains “graphic” information from his séance with the lawyer, which emphasizes the figurative quality of the lawyer’s legalese—a quality that renders it almost magical. Magic, argues Bényei, “turns things into images”; living events-as-images both “entangle us in the world” and put us “at an infinite distance from the world at the same time” (168).

1823 is the year when Bolivar’s promise of a great and independent Colombia, which spanned not only South America, but also the Caribbean, Puerto Rico, Cuba and Haiti—an apparently broad-minded proposal known as “integración a tierra firme”—came to naught. The reasons for this failure are various. Most interestingly, in 1823, Cuba’s attempts to join the South American mainland as an independent state were revealed to the United States by the printer charged with composing and reproducing pamphlets in support of this cause. In a sense, this is a key moment when the dissemination of the printed word emerges as an emblem of disenfranchisement rather than of its opposite. According to the Mexican historian German A. de la Reza, America’s defense of Cuba and Puerto Rico’s “status quo,” as well as the lack of Bolivarian armed forces in the Caribbean, and mounting civil conflict in Colombia, deferred the realization of a Caribbean Gran Colombia. This is not to say that the social situation and economic well-being of Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Haitians would have improved under Bolivar’s rule. It is simply to note that a nation which fused the Caribbean and South America into an independent Pan-American state was a long expected, and ultimately unfulfilled, dream, like the colonel’s pension. See De la Reza 65–82.
lottery with the arrival of the colonel’s pension brings us further into the realm of the absurd. His number does not correspond to a linear progressive (or regressive) movement—an actual *turn*—despite presenting itself as such. A logic of happenstance and recurrence—the number has already “come up twice in the lottery”—emerges as a more reliable (albeit hypothetical) approach to expectation management.

Paradoxically, absolute chance, when it presents itself as such, makes the Colonel “feel oppressed” by the “bitterness of chance.” After trying to sell his rooster to Don Sabas (the town’s richest inhabitant), he accompanies the tailor to the billiards hall. There the tailor joins a game of roulette and asks the Colonel to choose a number for him to bet on. The Colonel picks eleven, “apostaron al once cuando ya había empezado a girar la enorme rueda de colores” ‘bet on eleven after the enormous colored wheel had already begun to turn’ (74; 82). But as soon the wheel starts to spin the Colonel begins to suffer: “el Coronel se sintió oprimido. Por primera vez experimentó la fascinación, el sobresalto y la amargura del azar. Salió el cinco” ‘The colonel felt oppressed. For the first time he felt the fascination, agitation, and bitterness of gambling. The five won.’ As readers, we might expect the Colonel to remain calm in the face of chance and whimsy, given that his life is ruled by these forces. Chance and whimsy, it seems, are bearable insofar as they are the general and ineluctable condition of life, but not when they are mere simulations of arbitrary chance.

The colonel uses a kind of causal logic to pick a number in roulette: he picks eleven because “it that has come up most often.” Of course, eleven is as likely to come up as any other number, if the game is not rigged. 202 That it has come up in the past, has

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202 A character in Conrad’s *The End of the Tether* also confuses chance with causality. Massy, Captain Whalley’s partner, buys the *Sofola*, a merchant steamer, after winning the lottery. Unlike Captain Whalley, Massy dislikes ships and the craft of sailing—he is an engineer. Massy needs money to free himself from the
nothing to do with whether it will come up in the future. The interrelation of the mimetic and the causal, and both systems’ ultimate inability to predict the world’s outcomes, is emphasized by García Márquez’s recurrent use of this number (at eleven the trumpet blows the curfew, at eleven the Colonel sets his clock, Macondo’s “long rains” last for four years and eleven months, etc.) Eleven does not only contain the same number twice, it also contains the most mimetic of numbers twice. One is a multiplicative identity. It is its own factorial, square and square root, and any number multiplied by one is itself. We cannot help but think that in García Márquez’s world there is a certain logic born out of persistent (rather than transient) illogicality.

If there are no odds, the Colonel’s resilience in the face of happenstance becomes comprehensible. “El viernes siguiente volvió a las lanchas. Y como todos los viernes regresó a su casa sin la carta esperada” “The following Friday he went down to the launches again. And, as on every Friday, he returned home without the longed-for letter’ (35; 37). If official pronouncements work in mysterious and magical ways to those whom they are enjoined upon, past experience cannot be trusted to predict future outcomes.

The Colonel, it follows, does not use his knowledge of the past to predict the future:

—Ya falta poco para que venga la pensión —dijo el coronel.
—Estás diciendo lo mismo desde hace quince años.
—Por eso —dijo el coronel—. Ya no puede demorar mucho más.
—Ella hizo un silencio. Pero cuando volvió a hablar, al coronel le pareció que el tiempo no había transcurrido.

Massy’s obsession with the lottery is a compensation for his dissatisfaction as shipowner. Massey does not sail merchant ships because it’s a “straightforward occupation,” but because he wants money. This distortion in his approach to work coincides with a distortion in his approach to luck.
‘It won’t be long now till the pension comes,’ the colonel said.

‘You’ve been saying the same thing for fifteen years.’ ‘That’s why,’ the colonel said. ‘It can’t be much longer now.’ She was silent. But when she spoke again, it didn’t seem to the colonel as if any time had passed at all. ‘I have the impression the money will never arrive,’ the woman said. ‘It will.’ (65)

The colonel clings to his belief that his pension will arrive, even though experience suggests otherwise. But the Colonel’s obstinacy might well make sense considering that he lives in a world in which any evidence that could prove him wrong either does not exist or is blatantly made up. In his town, “Lo único que llega con seguridad es la muerte” ‘The only thing that comes for sure is death.’ (45; 62).
A Magical Command in The Shadow Line

In *The Shadow Line*, Conrad places the first mate’s paranoid superstitions alongside the captain’s stoic skepticism and the steward’s clear-sighted persistence. By associating the enchanted with the real, rather than with the imagined, Conrad highlights the illusion that accompanies perceptions originating outside of experience. The series of misfortunes that befalls the crew of the *Orient* in *The Shadow Line*, are strange enough as they are; attributing supernatural causes to them, is to miss their inherent mystery. Reality, in *The Shadow Line*, is neither fixed nor unbiased, as Conrad’s realist antecedents had had it. Rather, it is the visible ensign of wonders and legends to those experienced enough to notice them. Magic here is not an abstraction. It remains instead deeply ingrained in everyday objects and experiences.

The crew member who is most disposed to believe in magical superstitions is Mr. Burns, the first mate of *The Orient*. Burns is convinced that *The Orient* is haunted by the evil spirit of its previous captain. Burns’s beliefs, argues Conrad in the preface to the *Shadow Line*, may be superstitious, but they are very real. “This fact...[the reality of his superstitions],” he claims, “is one of the elements of the story, but there is nothing supernatural in it—nothing, so to speak, from beyond the confines of this world, which in

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203 Conrad’s rejects the warts-and-all realism of writers like Zola in favor of finding enchantment in the real. Conrad refused to distinguish between nature and artifice, romance and fact. “The romantic feeling of reality was in me an inborn faculty,” he writes—a far cry from Zola’s creed, which maligned “les mensonges de la légende” that make stones of living men. For a more thorough exploration of Conrad and his relation to the naturalist-realists before him, see Walton.

204 In *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach explores how fiction and other forms of literature recreate reality. Reality, he argues, is often the end-result of unexpected and mixed modes—suggestion on the one hand, permeation on the other; romance on one side, reality on the other. In “The Enchanted Dulcinea,” Auerbach discusses Don Quixote’s pitiful, ironic, yet absurdly chivalric gesture—a man-turned-knight kneeling before a peasant-turned-lady. The scene reveals to us how we see the everyday by having Quixote perform his chivalric gestures, this time ironically and uncertainly.
all conscience holds enough mystery and terror in itself” (x). The captain, on the other hand, considers himself the proud member of a “dynasty...continuous not in blood indeed, but in its experience, in its training, in its conception of duty, and in the blessed simplicity of its traditional point of view” (64). It is because the captain is a member of this dynasty of experienced men, I will show here, that he’s able to observe the world’s real marvels. In *The Shadow Line* Conrad plays the quixotic against the pragmatic to emphasize the marvelous reality of the captain’s observations and the obfuscating falsehoods of Burns’ magical (albeit real) speculations.

The boat is afflicted both by sickness and by lassitude, which seems to be caused by the heat and the calm. The captain rejects his crew’s attempt to find solace from their suffocation by resorting to illusion: “One could hardly blame them for trying for such coolness and such air as there were to be found on deck,” he says of his sailors (130). “One couldn’t really quarrel with their common, imprudent humanity...making the best of the movements of relief, when the night brought in the illusion of coolness and the starlight twinkled through the heavy, dew-laden air” (131). On similar grounds he rejects a “troublesome” sailor’s attempt to escape the heat by hiding in the sail-locker. “Ransome discovered him curled up in the sail-locker...when remonstrated with he muttered sulkily, ‘It’s cool in there.’ That wasn’t true. It was only dark there” (147). The captain does not mind that his sailors indulge in illusions, he minds that they do so to the detriment of a sailor’s craft—of whatever it is that good mariners should always be observing. The sailors’ illusion does not result from keen observation of the natural world. Instead, it results from a desire to ignore that world, to escape its maddening heat. They seek to cool off in dark places, such as the sail-locker, or on the deck by night. They mistake darkness for coldness and are none the better for it. Their illusion works only in dark places, leading to blindness rather than to clarity.
The narrator of *The Shadow Line* brings out the magic that lies in the real by making the everyday mysterious. He uses the vocabulary of fairy tales to describe the everyday and heighten its strangeness. “Captain Ellis (a fierce sort of fairy),” says the narrator of *The Shadow Line*, “produced a command out of a drawer almost as unexpectedly as in a fairy tale” (58).205 “With the magic word ‘Command’ in my head,” continues the captain, “I found myself suddenly on the quay as if transported there in the twinkling of an eye.” The captain uses the language of fairy tales to describe realistic elements—elements related to the sea and a sailor’s everyday work (such as the procedure by which an officer is assigned a ship). The repetition of the word “fairy,” and the use of words such as “magic,” here enchant the technical.

The sudden, magical “production” of a “command” is fairytale-like not only at the level of content (portals, twinkles, fairies), but also at the level of form. According to Vladimir Propp, the fourteenth structural element of a folktale is the “provision or receipt of a magical agent” (40). The convenient, sudden apparition of a ship for the novella’s hero is like the convenient, sudden apparition of a magical object for the hero of a fairy tale, except that the ship is not magical in an implausible way. “She was there waiting for me,” says the captain of *The Orient*, “spellbound, unable to move, to live, to get out into the world (till I came), like an enchanted princess. Her call had come to me as if from the clouds. I had never suspected her existence” (57). The ship is as essential

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205 Micheal Kotzin’s analysis of the narrator’s spell-like description of his ship emphasizes Conrad’s enchanted conception of the real world (rather than an imagined one). “I would suggest that Conrad’s narrator refers to the ship’s condition as spell-like,” writes Kotzin, “because Conrad himself conceived of it in that way. That is, for all of his repeated depictions of enchantment as being in the eye of the beholder and as being a manifestation of a youthful propensity for self-delusion, Conrad, it seems, also felt that, at times, things in the real world indeed do behave as if they were enchanted” (18).
for the advancement and development of the tale’s hero as it is for the development of
the plot.

But the hero of *The Shadow Line*, unlike the hero of a fairytale, rapidly disavows
the magical powers of the command. “But a command,” he says, “is an abstract idea, and
it seemed a sort of ‘lesser marvel’ till it flashed upon me that it involved the concrete
existence of a ship.” The ultimate marvel here is the ship’s actual (albeit narrated)
existence, and not the “abstract,” bureaucratic means by which this ship is placed under
the narrator’s command. By setting a seemingly magical act alongside a seemingly
mundane one, and then claiming that magic lies, not in the former but in the latter,
Conrad subverts his readers’ expectations of what constitutes the magical. Magic, and
magical stories, are found in the narration of the actual and the concrete rather than in
the abstract.

The captain’s description of his ship stresses her magical qualities, but also
explains what makes her so impressively lifelike. It’s because experienced hands made
her: “That illusion of life and character which charms one in men’s finest handiworks
radiated from her. An enormous bulk of teak-wood timber swung over her hatchway;
lifeless matter, looking heavier and bigger than anything aboard of her” (72; my
emphasis). She looks like a living being because she was made by expert hands.
Experience has made dead, dumb matter (“teak-wood timber,” “lifeless matter”) alive,
magical. The ship’s magic, he suggests, lies hidden in its material—it’s carefully nested
inside the everyday.

The captain heads to his steamer in a little launch. As soon his launch drops him in his
destination, it rapidly disappears behind him, in an almost magical way.

Only my movements were not deliberate. I hurried down the steps, and leaped
into the launch. Before I had fairly landed in her sternsheets the slim little craft
darted away from her jetty with a sudden swirl of her propeller and the hard, rapid puffing of the exhaust in her vaguely gleaming brass funnel amidships. (66)

The naturalistic detail in this passage announces that we are no longer exclusively in the realm of the fairy-tale. The technical words that appear in it (“stern sheets,” “jetties,” “launches,” “funnels,” “gleaming brasses”) attest to its realism. By drawing attention to the magical elements of the seemingly non-magical, the narrator of *The Shadow Line* reenchants a disenchanted reality.

The captain refuses to believe that his boat is haunted. He also refuses to believe any other theories that have this delusion as their starting point: “I felt the inexpugnable strength of common sense,” he says, “being insidiously menaced by this gruesome, by this insane, delusion [Burn’s delusion]” (84). He understands that something mystifying is happening to his ship. Yet he attributes this mystery to natural rather than supernatural causes. “You cannot expect me to believe” he says to Burns, “that a dead man has the power to put out of joint the meteorology of this part of the world” (125). It’s presumptuous to assume that man has any way to measure up to the forces of nature, suggests the captain.

Rather than the spell of its previous commander—the totem figure for the superstition of the crew—his ship is under the spell of the “evil powers of calms and pestilence” (131). Because he is an experienced seaman, he can parse empirically the mystifying and stultifying effects of the weather: “Not that the evil spell held us always motionless. Mysterious currents drifted us here and there, with a stealthy power made manifest only by the changing vistas of the islands fringing in the East shore of the Gulf. And there were winds too, fitful and deceitful” (124). Nature’s stealthy doings, its deceptive, almost magical, workings, are *made manifest* to the captain because he’s an
expert surveyor of landscape, because he’s able to gauge the subtle changes in his vista of the islands, bordering the East shore.

In a similar manner, the captain maintains that there is something magical about the healing powers of quinine, which as a good empiricist he resorts to the moment sickness strikes his ship: “I believed in [quinine]. I pinned my faith to it. It would save the men, the ship, break the spell by its medicinal virtue...like a magic powder working against mysterious malefices” (130). The captain’s rhetoric here is uncharacteristically precious. However, given his fair-mindedness in all other matters, we are compelled by the vehemence of his expostulations. The captain can call quinine magical because he has witnessed its healing powers. His belief in its magic, although callow, is experientially grounded. And he can attest to the magical effects of its powers with a degree of certainty.

Like Marlow, the unnamed captain of *The Shadow Line* is both a pragmatist and a romancer. “Oblivious of my new surroundings,” he says, “I walked the deck, in anxious deadened abstraction, a commingling of romantic reverie with a very practical survey of my qualifications” (70; my emphasis). Magic here is the fruit of technical and practical prowess, not of naive inexperience. “This road [the road to becoming a captain] my mind’s eye could see on a chart, professionally, with all its complications and difficulties, yet simple enough in a way” (64; my emphasis). Experience does not make him immune to illusion, but capable of seeing it. “People have great opinions of the advantages of experience,” says the Captain condescendingly, “but in this connection experience means always something disagreeable as opposed to the charm and innocence of illusions” (95). The captain, unlike other “people,” maintains that the only worthwhile illusions are those witnessed by experienced humans—illusions that reveal the world’s real wonders, rather than impose upon it otherworldly falsities.
A Magical Room in One Hundred Years of Solitude

The characters in One Hundred Years of Solitude perceive magical transformations of the real world in different ways. In One Hundred Years of Solitude the real can be transmuted into the unreal, and vice versa. These instances of colliding perspectives, I will argue in this section, reveal, in the first instance, a world in which differing perspectives of what constitutes the real remain unmet, and, in the second, a world that admits and remains unfazed by the polyphonous coexistence of opposing perspectives. The first instance, embodies language which is imposed and abstract, and results in severance and obfuscation. The second instance, is a reflection of a self-prompted impulse towards syncretism and inclusion, which does not enforce assimilation but admits and incorporates difference in its own terms.

One Hundred Years of Solitude responds to commonsensical efforts at communication, nonsensically, and to nonsensical efforts, commonsensically. Melquíades, for example, responds to characters’ attempts to communicate with him, by tossing random Spanish phrases that have “very little to do with reality.” Melquíades correspondió a aquel esfuerzo de comunicación soltando a veces frases en castellano que tenían muy poco que ver con la realidad” ‘Melquíades answered that effort at communication at times by giving forth with phrases in Spanish that had very little to do with reality’ (32; 40). Interestingly enough, it is through this nonsensical reordering and random redeployment of language that García Márquez finds the words with which to describe Macondo’s vernacular and absurd, albeit effective, reality.

In Chapter 10 of the novel, Aureliano Segundo enters Melquíades’ old room—which, since Melquíades’ death, no one had entered. Aureliano Segundo finds it in pristine state: “no había el menor rastro de polvo o telaraña, sino que todo estaba barrido
y limpio, mejor barrido y más limpio que el día del entierro” ‘there was not the slightest trace of dust or cobwebs, with everything swept and clean, better swept and cleaner than on the day of the burial’ (76; 94). For him, it is as if the room had touched the philosopher’s stone and kept its youthful air, despite the passage of time. Colonel Aureliano Buendía, on the other hand, does not see Melquíades’ room the same as the other members of his family. Rather than a sparkling clean room, he sees a dusty midden: “mientras el resto de la familia seguía asombrándose de que la pieza de Melquíades fuera inmune al polvo y la destrucción, él la veía convertida en un muladar” ‘while the rest of the family was still amazed by the fact that Melquíades’ room was immune to dust and destruction, he saw it turned into a dunghill’ (108; 128). Melquíades’ alchemical laboratory is for the Colonel a dusty and destructed dunghill, devoid of magical qualities. This room is the fount of various perspectives, from a starkly realistic and self-defeating vision to an alchemical and self-regenerative one. These various perspectives do not lead to conflict, but are both accepted as true.

It does not seem shocking to Úrsula and Aureliano Segundo that the Colonel does see the room as having accumulated dust. The Colonel, in turn, couldn’t care less who is in fact correct about the room’s actual state (clean or not): “de todos modos, no parecía importarle quién tenía la razón” ‘In any case, it did not seem to bother him who was correct.’ Whether a room is a dunghill or an alchemist’s quarters might merely be a matter of perspective.

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206 Like the Colonel, the younger José Arcadio is unmoved by the potential powers of alchemy. The philosopher’s egg looks to him like a poorly blown bottle (22).

207 The coexistence of discrepant points of view is at the heart of One Hundred Years of Solitude’s style. It is no surprise that García Márquez refused to have the novel turned into a movie. His technique often depends on a trompe l’oeil effect, which is only possible as a literary device.
The characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are not perturbed by phenomena that might seem extraordinary to outsiders. Neither are they surprised by their discrepant experiences of these phenomena. The room’s pristine, unchanged state does not shock Aureliano Segundo or Úrsula. Úrsula is merely left with nothing to do: “todo era tan reciente, que varias semanas después, cuando Úrsula entró al cuarto con un cubo de agua y una escoba para lavar los pisos, no tuvo nada que hacer” ‘Everything was so recent that several weeks later, when Úrsula went into the room with a pail of water and a brush to wash the floor, there was nothing for her to do’ (76; 94). There is no work that Úrsula can do to clean up this already magically cleaned up room.

Aureliano Segundo is surprised, however, by an old, unnamed book of marvelous tales he finds on the shelves of Melquíades’ old room. He immerses himself in its tales of talking fish and magic lanterns (and the tale of a woman who eats nothing but grains of rice she has stabbed with pins). The tales fascinate him, but they puzzle him enough to make him want to investigate further. Aureliano asks Úrsula to back up the fantastic tales he reads, even though he never doubts the veracity of the unexpected cleanliness of Melquíades’ room.

Aureliano, as a reader, does wonder about the plausibility of the fantastic tales in Melquíades’ unnamed volume. But he accepts without question the veracity of the wonders he witnesses as a character in a magically real novel. Doubting the excesses of the fantastic tales, he asks Úrsula “si todo aquello era verdad” ‘if all of that was true’ (78; 94). Úrsula answers that, indeed, such things used to be true, but that they no longer are, because the world is slowly coming to an end: “que sí, que muchos años antes los gitanos llevaban a Macondo las lámparas maravillosas y las esteras voladoras. Lo que pasa —suspiró— es que el mundo se va acabando poco a poco y ya no vienen esas cosas” ‘that many years ago the gypsies had brought magic lamps and flying mats to Macondo.'
‘What’s happening,’ she sighed, ‘is that the world is slowly coming to an end and those things don’t come here anymore.’ This pronouncement of hers has already proven true in an earlier chapter, when one afternoon, while working in the laboratory, José Arcadio and his sons see a flying carpet passing swiftly by the laboratory’s windows. The novel answers José Arcadio’s question in various registers.

The marvels Aureliano finds in Melquíades’ volume surprise him because they are not familiar. They belong to an old genre of fantasy tales. Although the tales are magical, they are not realistic in the sense of being like anything he knows in his social world. This is a particular case of a broader, commonly occurring phenomenon in García Márquez’s magical realist novels. The wonders in those novels, although derived from older, fantastic models, seem instantly familiar and believable, even though they aren’t. They glitter, to us as readers, like gold, despite being, in essence, base and everyday.

García Márquez’s compositions are alloyed—heteroglossic, multicultural and cross-generic, and their multiplicity disrupts their characters’ sense of reality. These disruptions paint a picture of reality which is unstable, subject to revision and revaluation. Pietro Crespi’s warehouse in Chapter 6 is “un invernadero de fantasía”—a hothouse of fantasy. His store contains objects from all over the world that make different sounds: “reproducciones del campanario de Florencia que daban la hora con un concierto de carillones, y cajas musicales de Sorrento, y polveras de China que cantaban al destaparlas tonadas de cinco notas, y todos los instrumentos músicos que se podían imaginar y todos los artificios de cuerda que se podían concebir” ‘Reproductions of the bell tower of Florence that told time with a concert of carillons, and music boxes from Sorrento and compacts from China that sang five-note melodies when they were opened, and all the musical instruments imaginable and all the mechanical toys that could be conceived’ (46; 51). Petri’s store is a miscellaneous accumulation of objects from
all over the world that range from miniature reproductions of famous sites, to small mechanized toys. The little trinkets and various musical instruments speak of disorder, creativity and reproduction. The discordant diffusion of sound and image that is heard and seen in Petri’s shop, is reminiscent of García Márquez’s literary universe, which mixes without any particular order the canonical and the local, leading to a unique reformulation of literary commonplaces through a process of indiscriminate incorporation and reappropriation.

The store brings happiness to Macondo’s citizens. It is a sonorous oasis (“remanso melódico”) that screens the harsh reality of war: “Gracias a él, la Calle de los Turcos, con su deslumbrante exposición de chucherías, se transformó en un remanso melódico para olvidar las arbitrariedades de Arcadio y la pesadilla remota de la guerra” (47; 58). A “remanso” is, literally, an idyllic retreat, usually near a stream of clear water.

Petri’s store is a digression from the arbitrary nightmare of war—a nightmare which is itself another form of digression, rather than a tangible reality. The armed conflict that takes place in the country in which Macondo is set, is never, in fact, resolved. In the midst of his store’s mad, discordant concert, that Pietro Crespi commits suicide. He kills himself because of his unrequited love for Amaranta. The night Amaranta ignores his angelic, otherworldly, serenade, he cuts his wrists with a razor, and thrusts them in a basin of bezoin:

El dos de noviembre, día de todos los muertos, su hermano abrió el almacén y encontró todas las lámparas encendidas y todas las cajas musicales destapadas y todos los relojes trabados en una hora interminable, y en medio de aquel concierto disparatado encontró a Pietro Crespi en el escritorio de la trastienda,
con las muñecas cortadas a navaja y las dos manos metidas en una palangana de benjuí. (47)

On November second, All Souls’ Day, his brother opened the store and found all the lamps lighted, all the music boxes opened, and all the docks striking an interminable hour, and in the midst of that mad concert he found Pietro Crespi at the desk in the rear with his wrists cut by a razor and his hands thrust into a basin of benzoin. (59)

Crespi’s ostentatiously romantic suicide stands in contrast to the routine and arbitrary causalities of the Colombian civil conflict. His solitary suicide takes place in the fantastic, sonorous oasis of his store, which is a refuge from “la pesadilla remota de la Guerra” (“the distant nightmare of the war”).

Macondo’s history is characterized by disjunction—perpetual imbalance between liberal and conservative, highland and littoral, legality and illegality, reality and image. Although the conflict between “real” and “unreal” is solved by remaining unsolved in the Buendía’s contrasting perspectives of Melquiades’s old room, it remains unresolved in its men’s various attempts to solve it with arms.
**Conclusion**

*Heart of Darkness, The Shadow Line, One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *No One Writes to the Colonel*, I argued here, are skeptical of narratives which make big promises about the future. In these novels, progress does not align with grand prognostications or in fact follow predetermined teleological paths. Instead, it becomes enmeshed in the contingency of the everyday. Through this process of enmeshment, progress becomes suffused with elements of romance: repetition, happenstance and digression. These romance-like qualities, which make progress seem enchanted, are attune to local rhythms and vernacular modes of experiencing and recounting. Repeated attempts to impose teleological narratives upon other places and people, on the other hand, do not, in these works, result in more accurate representations of everyday situations, but in their systematic obfuscation. When progress does take place, these works suggest, it is impervious to its own forward movement.

Through the incorporation of varying attempts to perceive the world as either magical or not, Conrad and García Márquez’s works depict mystifying illusion and its counterpart—an apprehension of the real that is informed by the practice of physical craft. They use the techniques of romance—repetition, errancy and chance—not to separate their readers from reality, but to re-present it to them. In their novels and tales enchantment is accessible to the experienced and the practiced. On the other hand, attempts to make the world ordered or magical from afar and without experience lead to erroneous reenactments of either order or magic. Paradoxically, in the works discussed here, the ironic awareness of the worlds’ purposelessness, results in the recreation and dissemination of stories—stories which portray but do not attempt to order circumstances repeatedly liable to chance and the unexpected.
In *Heart of Darkness* and *The Shadow Line*, Conrad subjects to persistent ironic challenge the misplaced fancies of those who lack technical experience and are therefore inclined to enchant ideals rather than realities. Conrad’s narrators trace the sudden apparition of magic in an otherwise real world through their careful consideration of ships and their parts, their technical components. García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* sings of war and daily life in a cacophonous amalgamation of diverting sounds and registers. This novel casts in an ironic perspective attempts to reenact foundational narratives in non-epical contexts—while also recognizing the inevitability and necessity of such reenactments. These reenactments magnify repetition and frustration, and eventually constitute a local sort of logic which is parodic but expansive.

In *No One Writes to the Colonel*, García Márquez depicts the colonel’s deluded expectations—expectations that lead to further waiting and perpetuation of the same, rather than to a promised life-altering reward. Through repetition a reality that is foreign and imposed is transformed and made local.

The works of Conrad and García Márquez cling to the knowledge that experience delivers in order to reenchant the world. They do not seek to overcome or to conquer romantic digressions and accidents using arms, but to integrate these accidents into stories.
Conclusion

But the Dwarf answered: No; something human is dearer to me than the wealth of all the world.
—Rumpelstiltskin

Writers have sought to lay bare the tricks of their trade in various manifestos, interviews and prefaces throughout the ages. Henry James recommends that writers of fiction enter their “notes in a common place book” (“The Art of Fiction” 9). According to Virginia Woolf, a writer needs “a room of her own” and “five hundred a year” (99). Ernest Hemingway famously asserted that “you write until you come to a place where you still have your juice” (64). Not as much, however, has been said of writing’s relation to other crafts. Indeed, writers often use the language of craft to describe their own writing process by way of metaphor. Writing, says Truman Capote, “has laws of perspective, of light and shade.” For W. H. Auden, “the greatest writer cannot see through a brick wall but, unlike the rest of us, he does not build one.” Yet, for all their frank curiosity about their own handicraft, writers (critics included) seldom explore how other manual disciplines physically inflect and inform the written word.

Walter Benjamin famously interlaced storytelling with craft in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller.” Craft, he argued, not only encouraged the telling of tales, but also shaped the very way that tales were told. In this same essay, Benjamin laments the loss of storytelling in modernity—a loss he attributes to the rise of industrial capitalism, which interferes with pre-industrial craft-making processes and, in consequence, with the oral communication of experience. In this dissertation I have sought to explore the role craft continues to play in our ability to make, to tell and, also, to write. Joseph Conrad’s and Gabriel García Márquez’s approach to the written word, I have argued,
follows a committed and highly technical devotion to tales and their telling, as well as to the crafts that give rise to this sort of telling. These authors use stories to reveal the detrimental effect that the destruction of manual crafts (and the communities that practice them) has had on the oral transmission of autochthonous experience.

Conrad and García Márquez, I have aimed to show, are critical of the dissemination of mechanical modes of seeing and knowing. However, their approach to stories and craft is not nostalgic, exactly. Their response to this encroachment is not to declare stories dead, but to use stories to keep stories going. They use stories not only to engender more stories, but also to defy ways of knowing which reject autochthonous tales and practices as valid epistemological frameworks and approaches. Their own approach to craft, and to the craftsmen in their stories, is not fatalistic or plaintive, but ameliorative and regenerative.

Drawing on the works of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and Max Weber, I looked at the intimate relation of manual practices of making and handling to storytelling. Information, I argued, is stored not only in material shaped by human hands, but also in the stories those hands tell. That is, stories arise from craft—they are not simply communicated through it. Craftsmanship is crucial for the transfer and development of knowledge, and the consolidation of alternative forms of seeing, saying and organizing. These alternative forms, in turn, manifest themselves in stories.

I investigated how the interruption or devaluation of craft and everyday local practices can undermine a community’s notion of what constitutes a story and, by extension, that community’s ability to transmit and make valuable local forms of seeing, saying and doing—effectively muting the community. When global ideas about progress, reason, Christianity and civilization supplant local narratives and economies, communal notions and ways of perceiving and establishing reality break down.
The unreliable, strange, arbitrary dicta of officialdom are an endless fount of distortion and obfuscation in the works of these two authors. These obfuscations justify the implementation of large-scale capitalist and extractive enterprises which interfere with local making processes and, by extension, local tælletelling strategies. Extractive enterprises sever people’s relation to the land they inhabit and degrade the processes by which they shape and define this land. Mystification, and the violent imposition of force under the pretense of civilization, wreak such havoc that, in the case of Conrad, they deeply rupture reality, and, in the case of García Márquez, empty it out altogether.

Stories, I have claimed, must reconfigure themselves to provide meaningful, self-made accounts of a reality which extractive economic enterprises administered from above and from afar have radically fragmented. The process for making stories meaningful and valuable to those who create and share them is radically transformative—or, in the metaphor García Márquez is so fond of, alchemical. The reappropriation and revaluation of stories is an idealistic pursuit, the path to which is mysterious and enigmatic. Yet this process is also tied to an individual’s ability to practice and experiment with available material—to know this material through manipulation and attempted reformulation. The ironic reappropriation of stories—to make meaning out of what was previously chaotic or freighted with pretense—is a regenerative process that informs the works of these two authors.

In the works of Conrad and García Márquez, craft begets a particular knowledge. This knowledge is not only born of practice, but shaped by the very techniques required to carry out that practice. It is a kind of knowledge gained through habit, experientially and empirically. However, the knowledge that crafts and everyday practices beget, although empirical, is neither axiomatic nor systematic. It is not always explicable by way of reason or method; it is simply the byproduct of proximity, communal experience
and tradition. This knowledge is considered efficacious by those in possession of it because its efficacy is perceivable and not necessarily provable or theoretically explainable. Crucially, this knowledge tends to be transmitted through communities orally—usually in the form of stories. For this reason, forms of knowledge acquisition contained in local stories have the power to defy, disassemble—and eventually reassemble—exclusive and hegemonic cultural discourses.

Through the reincorporation of storytelling techniques and tactics, García Márquez and Conrad seek to restore the world’s strangeness, rather than explain away this strangeness through alien and alienating calculations of value. By experimenting with the techniques and the material of the storyteller, they break with universalizing narratives of telos and order. They resort to the praxis of craft and its prerequisite technical skills to reveal the irreducible nature of the material they handle—a revelation which nevertheless neither mystifies nor proselytizes.

Through a process of continuous handling of and experimentation with tales and their telling, Conrad and García Márquez transfigure the common word into something marvelous and differently valuable. In their works, the wonderful is a revelation of the unsuspected which is also the common and readily available. As a result, they bring forth new literary phenomena and forms. These new forms follow processes of reproduction, multiplication and dissemination which are not mechanical but varied and sympathetic. Stories beget other stories through the prompting of a quintessentially alchemical reaction: the attraction of like with like.

In what is now largely considered to be his artistic manifesto—his preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*—Conrad writes:
it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage. (x)

Conrad’s prose is the result of the studied blending of language’s forms and substances—a blending which momentarily brings to light the magical within the commonplace and ameliorates the careless and empty deployment of words and of language. His unremitting manipulation of stories—showing the reader how, literally, meaning is changed by the work of the author’s hand—renders the stories plastic, and eventually, at times, magical.

For Gabriel García Márquez, the continued retelling and pursuit of stories also leads to the unexpected revelation and ennoblement of the prosaic. In his article “El cuento del cuento,” published in the Spanish newspaper El País, García Márquez recounts the genesis of Chronicle of a Death Foretold. This novel emerged from a sporadic process of retelling and subsequent rediscovery. Don Ramón Vinyes claims García Márquez in this article, gave him the “la formula de oro” ‘the golden formula’ for turning the story of a real murder into a full-fledged novel: “Cuéntala mucho” ‘Tell it a lot,’ he said, “es la única manera de descubrir lo que una historia tiene por dentro” ‘it is the only way to discover what lies inside a story.’ Heeding Vinyes’ advice, García Márquez repeats the tale of the assassination of Santiago Nasaar to whoever is willing to listen—his wife, his friends, his agent.

A Ruy Guerra se la conté durante seis horas en un pueblo remoto de Mozambique, una noche en que los amigos cubanos nos dieron de comer un perro de la calle haciéndonos creer que era carne de gacela y ni aún así pudimos descubrir el elemento que le faltaba.
To Ruy Guerra I told it in the course of six hours in a remote town in Mozambique, one night in which our Cuban friends fed us dog by making us think we were eating gazelle meat instead and not even then could we find its missing element.

Years later, during a conversation with Álvaro Cepeda Samudio, García Márquez discovers his story’s “missing element”—the realization that it was not the story of a scandalous crime, but of an impossible love affair, a romance. Having realized this, García Márquez sets off on a journey to find Bayardo San Román and Ángela Vicario—his novel’s protagonists. After a series of equivocations, missteps and reencounters, García Márquez finally finds Ángela Vicario in a small town in the north of Colombia (I am taking the great fabulist at his word here). He sees her through her living room window, embroidering with a machine.

En la ventana de la sala, bordando a máquina en la hora de más calor, había una mujer de medio luto con antiparras de alambre y canas amarillas, y sobre su cabeza estaba colgada una jaula con un canario que no paraba de cantar.

In the living room window, embroidering with a machine, in the day’s hottest hour, there was a woman, in half-mourning, with wiry spectacles and grayish yellow hairs, above her head hung a cage with a canary that would not stop singing.

García Márquez doubts whether the woman in this “idyllic frame” is the actual Ángela Vicario, because he is reluctant to admit how much real life resembles “la mala literature” ‘bad literature.’

In yet another retelling of how Chronicle of a Death Foretold came to be, García Márquez gives a different account of his discovery of the novel’s missing element. This was the discovery that “los dos homicidas no querían cometer el crimen y habían hecho todo lo posible para que alguien se lo impidiera, y no lo consiguieron” ‘the two murderers
did not actually want to murder anybody, and they had done everything they could to make someone stop them, but had not succeeded' (Apuleyo 37; my translation). García Márquez’s novella turns out to be not the fulfillment of a prophecy, but of the frustrated attempt to defer that prophecy’s fulfillment. Through a series of frames, digressions, retellings and incrustations, García Márquez gives an account of the unintended and evanescent marvels of the everyday.

Conrad and García Márquez use stories to de-automatize epistemological narratives and to ground them instead in the experiential, the practical and the circumstantial. It is no accident that Ángela Vicario is embroidering with a machine when García Márquez finally sees her. She is, in this sense, an image of the story-writing novelist, who frames stories within novels, integrating pre-industrial practices within industrial processes, to reimagine narrative possibilities. The caged canary hints at the potential force contained in folkloric and autochthonous forms of knowing and saying. Its non-stop singing is evocative of the insistent thump of stories that accompanies manual practices.

In a letter to Cunningham Graham written in 1897, Conrad describes the universe as a knitting machine, which determines the lives of all living things without sense or method, thereby defying all man’s attempts to bring about progress or reform.

There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps and iron and behold! –it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider—but it goes on knitting. You can and say: “This is all right; it’s only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this—for instance—celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.” Will it? Alas, no! You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought,
without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened. You can’t interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can’t even smash it. In virtue of the truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is—and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters. I’ll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.

Using the image of the self-knitting machine, Conrad depicts an indifferent universe, which creates for no other reason than creation itself. The machine continues to knit not by following any particular pattern or direction, but by integrating more of what it makes back into itself. There is nothing man can do to redetermine this process. This machine builds up a fabric without embellishing it in any particular way—it does not, alas, produce an embroidery or any sort of representation.

But the fact that man cannot determine this machine’s course of production does not mean that man is entirely without agency. It is through work, Conrad intimates, that man can observe and even amuse himself with the fabric that comes out of the machine. One of the virtues of work, argues Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, is the ability to observe the real world uniquely. “I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work, —the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no man can ever know” (25).

Embroidery is not what the machine does, but what man can do to observe and to know its fabric. According to the master weaver Anni Albers, embroidery, unlike weaving, is “a *working of just the surface*, since it does not demand that we give thought to the engineering task of building up a fabric” (47; my emphasis). If the machine’s fabric is a given, the question becomes how to proceed with the “working” of its surface. In
Conrad’s *Nostromo*, Giselle, one of the Viola sisters, is an embroider—a possible image of Conrad the author. During a heated conversation with Nostromo, Linda does not see her sister Giselle, who “came out with an altar-cloth she was embroidering in her hands, and passed in front of them, silent, fresh, fair, with a quick glance and a faint smile, to sit a little away on the other side of Nostromo” (469). Conrad the author imperceptibly works over material that he observes to reimagine and reconstrue the story of Nostromo.

Conrad’s and García Márquez’s storytelling craftsmen operate in quasi-industrial settings. Marlow’s tales take place in vessels that move under steam, not under sail. The colonel’s wife makes clothing in a town shaped by global commerce and politics. Similarly, Conrad’s and García Márquez’s deployment of stories occurs within an industrial form—the novel. A printed novel, unlike a reported tale, is reproduced mechanically and exactly. The novel, unlike the story, can exist separate from the conditions in which it was produced—defying the immediate presence that is required of the storyteller. The novel, also, is integrated into a global market. Unlike a story, the novel is by nature a commodity. The novel, nevertheless, is a vehicle sturdy enough to carry within it whatever is against it. By suffusing the novel with the techniques and tactics of the oral storyteller, Conrad and García Márquez repurpose it.

Through the self-conscious integration of stories into novels, these two authors promote alternative modes of reproduction, transmission, and dissemination—of narrating what is considered real. The modes of reproduction particular to stories are organic and vernacular—stories give way to other stories effortlessly. In this process of integration and reconfiguration, Conrad and García Márquez transform the written word to depict alternative notions of the real.
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