



## The CIPHERED KNOT: Reading through the Many Impasses in Marquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

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### Abstract

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fiction, an interweaving of the journalistic ethic, the need to investigate and inform, allies closely with the creative art of storytelling—a coming together that could fly in the face of genre and classification, but one that finds dynamic integration in his writing. While drawing attention to the collaborative practice that brought fiction and journalism into a productive tension in his work, I will, in my essay, see the ways in which this is foregrounded in the writing of his 1981 novella, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. For this, I will also look at the event of Santiago Nasar's death in the novel through a reading of Roland Barthes' categorization of the *fait-divers* as a literary technique that emphasizes the details of the event rather than its emotional or moral implications.

**Keywords:** Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Journalism, Chronicle, Roland Barthes, Pundonor, Fait-Divers, Causality, Patriarchy

### Introduction

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fiction, an interweaving of the journalistic ethic, the need to investigate and inform, allies closely with the creative art of storytelling—a coming together that vexes genre and classification. As a point of departure, this had long been acknowledged by the writer himself, and he is famously known to have said: "Journalism keeps me nailed to reality. Curiously, as time goes on, I find the professions of fiction and journalism merging" (Marquez and Streitfeld 60). In this, he also consciously sought to draw the reader's attention to the hybridization that his writing mines, and what Francisco Rodríguez Sierra sees as the "mixing and matching of the 'fictional pact' and the 'pact of veracity'" (Sierra 213) that has come to singularly define his writing. Marquez's twin careers as journalist and writer ran parallel, and were launched more or less simultaneously with the publication of his first short story,

“The Third Resignation” in 1947 in *El Espectador*, and his newspaper article, “The People of the City” a few months later in 1948, in *El Universal*. Journalism functioned, in a sense, as his day job, giving him much needed financial security, one that allowed him the means to sustain his fiction writing—which, during the early years, was a night-time pursuit. And yet, he never created a distinction in the creative passion that he invested both his professional journalism and his fiction writing with. Despite the success and recognition that came his way, first with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 and then with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, he continued to maintain a publicly announced loyalty to his journalistic work.

While drawing attention to the collaborative practice that brought fiction and journalism into a productive tension in his work, I will, in my essay, see the ways in which this gets foregrounded in the writing of his 1981 novella, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. For this, I will also look at the event of Santiago Nasar’s death in the novel through a reading of Roland Barthes’ categorization of the *fait-divers* as a literary technique that emphasizes the details of the event rather than its emotional or moral implications. While the reporting of political news demands an embedded context, with the *fait-divers*, as Barthes says, everything is given, “its circumstances, its causes, its past, its outcome, without duration and without context, it constitutes an immediate, total being which refers, formally at least, to nothing implicit” (Barthes 186–187). How this is implicated within both the narration and reception of the news of the killing, will be delineated during the course of this essay.

### **Mining a Productive Tension**

In his short piece “The Precursors” that he wrote for *El Espectador*, Marquez cites both journalism and storytelling as equally important community archives. “Without doubt”, he says tongue in cheek, “the first sensational news produced—after creation—was the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. It would have been an unforgettable front page” (Marquez, *The Scandal of the Century* 43). Every town and every place, he says, will have reporters, either as gossip relayers

or professionals, who would transfer conversations from the page to the street corner, “There will always be a man reading an article in the corner of a drugstore, and there will always—because this is the funny thing—be a group of citizens ready to listen to him, even if just to feel the democratic pleasure of not agreeing with him” (Marquez, *The Scandal of the Century* 43). This, for him, is how communities converse and cross plough stories between fiction and fact.

During his years at Bogotá’s *El Espectador*, Colombia’s oldest newspaper, Marquez specialized in writing human-interest stories, as well as in-depth investigative pieces related to public life in Colombia. Of these early writings, perhaps the best known remains *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, which was serialized over 14 days. His other exposés, covering military scandals, the government’s indifference and neglect of war veterans, and also a series that drew attention to state corruption and smuggling, earned him the government’s ire. So much so that not only was he forced to relocate to Paris as a foreign correspondent, but the government also shut down *El Espectador* for its incendiary intent.

The investigative stories Marquez wrote were marked by a dramatic, compelling quality—a quality soon recognized and eagerly awaited by a reading public that often queued outside the newspaper’s office for copies that carried his pieces. As Raymond L. Williams notes, he possessed a remarkable artistic ability, one that was able to transform a news item into an anecdote—complete with literary undertones (Williams 118). For Marquez, of course, this never quite qualified as a difference marked through genre: “The essence of literature and of journalism is the credibility they create” (Marquez and Streitfeld 60). While the shared credibility that he speaks of might seem to be at odds with the incredulous that finds its way into his fiction, he explains this through the classical understanding that lies at the heart of magic realism— one that goes a long way in uncomplicating the “magic” in it: “[E]veryday life in Latin America proves that reality is full of the most extraordinary things” (Marquez and Mendoza 36).

While working at the *El Heraldo*, Marquez was writing columns called “giraffes”, which poetically experimented with the spare language of reportage—a style that would come to be uniquely his, and one that was identifiable in his writing throughout his career as a journalist. His 1996 documentary novel, *News of a Kidnapping*, about Pablo Escobar, Colombia’s powerful drug lord, is written like a gripping Marquezian news story, with all its urgencies brought to life in a literary language and style.

When he announced that he was withdrawing from literature for as long as the Pinochet dictatorship continued in Chile (the period of his self-imposed hiatus started in 1976 and ended in 1981) and would continue only with his journalist commitments, the publication of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* was justifiably greeted with some amount of public cynicism. But in an interview soon after Marquez clarified that he was not really breaking his pledge since the work in question was a “chronicle”. In this, he was outlining what he saw as the minimal difference that separated reporting and the writing of a chronicle. This, in fact, ties in with his oft-expressed desire to combine journalism and fiction in such a way that the news item could be enriched with fictive elements in a creatively satisfying manner (qtd. in Rabassa 48).

### **Chronicling Events**

As an unstructured, protean genre, the chronicle as a popular narrative mode in the Middle Ages disseminated events through a particular brand of telling that wove in both literary aestheticism as well as the historian’s responsibility to recapture and convey information. In Latin America, chronicles have dotted the history of its foundational literature right from the time of the first Spanish explorers and conquistadors (a history that also both overlooks and denies indigenous writing as it existed before Columbus’ log). Written as first-person reports, the “Chronicles of the Indies”, as they are now loosely termed generically, were important documents detailing native American customs and traditions—written undoubtedly to mine the recorded information for trade and colonizing. As chronicles, their documentation included a mix of

journalism's report and essay, and from literature, the language and effect of theatre and poetry—narrated through the subjective idiosyncrasies of the chronicler. The subject matter of a chronicle typically coheres around a matter of some significance, “a great undertaking” (White 20) as it were.

When Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* first appeared, it was embroiled in a cacophony of different claims regarding its generic grounding, and also its relationship to real and actual events. The events narrated in the novel relate to the highly publicized tragic circumstances that occurred in 1951 in Sucre, Colombia, involving the murder of Marquez's childhood friend, Cayetano Gentile, by the brothers of Margarita Chica Salas—who were seeking to avenge her “dishonour”. After Margarita's husband, Miguel Reyes Palencia, discovers on their wedding night that she was not a virgin, she names Cayetano, to who she had earlier been engaged, as the one responsible. Miguel's “returning” of his wife to her parent's home the day after the wedding, then sets in motion the event of Cayetano's publicly announced murder. As a young man, Garcia Marquez had been invited to the wedding, but had not directly witnessed the drama of the killing. Speaking of the incident decades later, he says,

It was still not the time of easy telephones, and personal long-distance calls were arranged first by telegram. My immediate reaction was a reporter's. I decided to travel to Sucre to write the story, but at the paper they interpreted this as a sentimental impulse. And today I understand, because even back then we Colombians killed one another for any reason at all, and at times we invented one, but crimes of passion were reserved as luxuries for the rich in the cities. It seemed to me that the subject was eternal and I began to take statements from witnesses (Marquez, *Living to Tell the Tale* 334).

In his reconstruction of the episode for *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Marquez changed the names and the number of protagonists involved, and also kept both the village and the narrator unnamed. The decision to sidestep certain biographical details was in

deference to his mother's reserve regarding the retelling of the incident—since she was intimately associated with the community and, in particular, the dead man, Cayetano's mother, Julieta Chimento. In fact, Marquez took on the project of writing the novel, and its publishing, only after Julieta's death:

My mother remained firm in her determination to prevent this despite every argument, until thirty years after the drama, when she herself called me in Barcelona to give me the sad news that Julieta Chimento, Cayetano's mother, had died without ever getting over the loss of her son. But this time, with her strong moral sense, my mother found no reasons to interfere with the article (Marquez, *Living to Tell the Tale* 553).

In the novel, the writer-narrator returns to the site of the crime more than 27 years later, ostensibly to decode the event and compose a story, “trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many scattered shards” (Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* 5). The craft of reportage for the story is honed through a particular speciality of Marquez—what in Latin American newspaper parlance is called the *refrito* or “refried”, which is a detailed reconstruction of a dramatic news item, retold and written with an almost virtuoso narrative skill. Further in this, the narrative technique takes on the mantle of Marquez's own particular journalistic style—one that comes leavened through his literary sensibility. s

#### **News of the Killing as *Fait-Divers***

*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* begins with its own purported ending, and a telos is attempted upon the opening line, “On the day they were going to kill Santiago Nasar” (Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* 1). But as Carlos Alonso incisively delineates in “Writing and Ritual in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*”, “the development of the text is guided primordially by a performative rather than by a logical or teleological drive” (Alonso 153). The recall of events is mounted upon a lurid, sensationalistic detailing, and, in this, it gestures at what the French term as, *fait-divers* — borrowed and

popularized in the work of writers like Flaubert, Gide, Camus, and Breton, among others. For this, I will draw upon Roland Barthes' 1964 essay, "Structure of the *Fait-divers*", where he talks of the quotidian theatricality of the smaller news items hierarchized against the bigger, usually political, news story in the daily press, which can be understood only in relation to a knowledge anteriorly and externally present. The event of Santiago Nasar's gruesome killing in the novel reads as the Barthesian *fait-divers*, giving the reader "all" the details, and information necessary for "understanding" the death, it "contains all its knowledge in itself. No need to know anything about the world in order to consume a *fait-divers*; it refers formally to nothing but itself" (Barthes 185). The *fait-divers* marks in this its own self-sufficiency, its own hermeneutics—lurking at the edge of totality, never quite integrated into it. Barthes reads in this, its closeness to the short story, the tale, and not the novel—for it is never purposed as a fragment, since it is its immanence that defines it. Although formally structured as a news brief, the *fait-divers* also borrows from literature the complicated greyness of a causality, implicated within coincidence and chance. Further, as Sophie Beaulieu writes, its telling informs the reader of the "who, what, why, where, and when" of the event, but as she says, "the event must also lend itself to a telling that makes the hearer of the tale cognizant, though perhaps in feeling more than in thought, that a chasm has opened up between the particular real-life incident he is hearing about and the familiar social, moral, or natural norms that he assumes are in place regulating real-life incidents" (Beaulieu 150). What the chasm opens up to and what it reveals in the novel, I will come to presently.

The *fait-divers* approaches reality from a decentered, ex-centric point, unsettling and disturbing the hegemony of the overt and the established. Its telling evokes an astonishment, one that comes from its estrangement from known social and cultural contexts—as Barthes says, "astonishment always implies a disturbance, since in our civilization, every elsewhere of a cause seems to be situated more or less declaratively outside of nature, or at least outside of the natural" (Barthes 188). In this, it creates space for a different mode of engaging with society and its underlying frictions—through an almost primordial, savage intervention, as it were.

With this, the *fait-divers* performs an “eventing” of an otherwise precluded thought or action and in this, bringing it into critical scrutiny. With this, it ruptures what has come to be consensually established and even homogenized—and it does this by insidiously inserting a subversive social critique through its shocking staging. It provokes the reader, as Jeannette Baxter says, “into a confrontation with the deviant logics and violent psychopathologies which operate below the polite surface of contemporary history and culture” (Baxter). This was also what fascinated the Surrealists about the *fait-divers*—triggered by the disgust and disdain they felt for what they perceived as the bourgeoisie’s repressive values and its everyday collusions with capitalism and religion. The sensationally lurid *fait-divers* had afforded them the rich potential for visual and literary experimentation that had augmented and fed their surrealist re-visioning.

In a referencing thus of the *fait-divers* in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, what I am attempting to also establish is the townspeople’s tacit acceptance of the inevitability of Santiago Nasar’s murder—an acceptance that extends from a shared understanding of it. It is an understanding that is conditioned and arrived at by a primordial sanctioning, one that evades social structures of knowing. In this, be it the avenging of the crime against Angela Vicario or the Vicarios’ killing of the “perpetrator”, the action is located within a collective adjudication of the crimes. For the reader-outsider, the immanence of the event forecloses the possibility of easy comprehensibility and understanding. The narrator ostensibly guides and leads the reader while also stopping and highlighting various instances and causes—and, in this, misleading the reader into believing that a satisfactory explanation and resolution for the killing is possible. The narrator plays with the incredulity that the occurrence invokes, simulating all along the thrust and thoroughness of an investigative report. And yet this only deepens the mystery, never quite resolving it or allowing it closure. The reader is to finally realize that the narrative is structured as an evasion, a ruse, mounted on a Barthesian “aberrant causality” (Barthes 188) that will resist easy knowability, as the narrator revealingly lets slip in through his perspicacious remark, “affairs of



honor are sacred monopolies with access only for those who are part of the drama” (Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* 98).

### **The Pundonor**

The honour code, the *pundonor*, as it is referred to in Spanish, horrifically invoked in the killing of Santiago Nasar, is set in opposition to the inquisitorial court of law that bases its judgements and legislations on testimonies, witnesses, and a civilizational ratiocination through which cases are argued and fought. It is also set up against the importance that the narrative accords to dreams, intuition, and superstitions that characters recall and colour their retrospectives through. There is a semantic saturation that overloads the day’s events, and in its excesses, it thwarts every attempt at narrative closure. Finally, after the inquest, the court is forced into an acknowledgement of the dense network of unknowability, and a different order of meaning that informs the killing—defying all possibilities of investigative inference and deduction. Such is the perplexity of the investigative magistrate in the face of what stands as a social hieroglyphic that he writes his judgement notes in deference to the enigma: “Most of all, he never thought it legitimate that life should make use of so many coincidences forbidden to literature, so that there should be the untrammelled fulfilment of a death so clearly foretold” (Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* 100). Here in the magistrate’s report is a rueful acceptance of failure—of a lack of control over an incident that was always going to be non-investigatable. As Barthes says, “an ideology and a psychoanalysis of the *fait-divers* are possible, but they would concern a world of which knowledge is never anything but intellectual, analytical, elaborated at second-hand by the person who speaks of the *fait-divers*, not by the person who consumes it” (Barthes 186).

The constitutive ambivalence of the *fait-divers* might, in the first instance, elude intellectual comprehension, but in it is a lesson that reveals an unfiltered, unmediated reality. What is it finally then that the killing of Santiago Nasar— an event that mimics the *fait-divers* in its reporting— reveal? For this it is necessary to go back and reconstruct the marshalling of the *pundonor*—the honour code—as it

is evoked to direct and organize the circumstances leading to the killing of Santiago Nasar. The *pundonor* exists as a closed system, a structure of belief that constitutively drafts the response to familial “dishonouring”. Within this, violence and all forms of vengeful action are read as justifications against the violation of the code. Angela’s purported “dishonouring” (it is never revealed in the novel, whether her lost virginity resulted from a consensual sexual encounter or from rape), and her naming of Santiago Nasar as the man responsible, sets up the irrevocability of the vengeful violence that prompts and propels her brothers.

It is also for this reason that there is no cathartic relief for the townspeople, and even decades later, the town continues to reek like an open wound, “For years we couldn’t talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to spin around a single common anxiety” (Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* 97). The violence that ravages the town only reinstates the critical hold of the *pundonor* as a code that has to be maintained and followed.

It is important to bring in the brief of the *fait-divers* that my essay has attempted to read it through, and for this it is necessary to see what the mobilizing of the *pundonor* and the resultant horrors it unleashes, reveal. While the *pundonor* exists as a closed structure of beliefs, primal and in opposition to accepted and regulated social behaviour, it also reveals the patriarchal ordering of men and women’s lives, as the novel reminds the reader, “The brothers were brought up to be men. The girls had been reared to get married” (Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 30). In the staging of violence and the *fait-divers* that informs the creation of the news of Santiago Nasar’s gruesome public killing, is a reminder of the everyday patriarchal violence that demands men and women’s submission. What Marquez accomplishes deftly in a story that never really establishes the veracity of Santiago Nasar’s guilt, is an ingenious albeit potent comment on our lived social encodings that successfully paper over and suppress violent excesses. If, as Barthes says, there is an anti-God that prowls behind the deranged causality of the *fait-divers*, then it is a playing out of that causality that needs

our attention. It is finally not an aberrant or deranged causality that disorders the reader's understanding of the killing, but a crucial and urgent reminder of all that has been contracted to ensure social behaviour remains regulated and non-disruptive of the status quo. For Barthes the *fait-divers* was a form of "mythology" that revealed the underlying structures of society and the way that power operates within it. Both Barthes' *fait divers* and Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* demonstrate the importance of questioning dominant narratives and looking beyond the surface of events to understand their underlying structures and dynamics. They also highlight the way that language and storytelling can be used to create and shape truth, and the value of being critical readers and listeners in order to uncover the hidden meanings and agendas that underlie our social and cultural realities.

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