

## The Fusion of Subjective and Objective Realities in Gabriel García Márquez's "Nabo: The Black Man Who Made the Angels Wait"

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"Nabo: The Black Man Who Made the Angels Wait," first published in 1951, seems because of its setting and its subject matter to represent an anomaly in the work of Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. The story of a negro servant and his white masters is set presumably in the Faulknerian atmosphere of the Southern United States, during the early twentieth century, and several critical studies have pointed out this story's atypical focus on a foreign reality.<sup>1</sup> In fact, however, the unique setting of "Nabo" serves merely as a backdrop for a more important exploration of individual, subjective, interiorized realities, for an exploration of the solitude and lack of communication which form the base of the author's mature fiction. Much of this later fiction adopts an objective narrative stance; because of that more distanced narrative focus, the characters are seldom seen from within, and thus a central issue of the texts, the characters' apparently self-imposed solitude and inability to communicate, is never fully decipherable. On the other hand, the types of self-enclosure and isolation found in the early writings, because they are narrated either in the first person or via an interiorized perspective, reveal the characters' power to create or maintain their own reality, and then that reality's imprisoning power over them. These concepts are not discarded in the later writing of such works as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), but rather remain as implicit assumptions which can best be understood in light of the earlier fiction.<sup>2</sup>

"Nabo: The Black Man Who Made the Angels Wait" is the most technically intricate and successful story of this early phase. Significantly, contradicting the accepted chronology provided by most studies of this period of literary production, the comprehensive collection of García Márquez's early work compiled by Jacques Gilard reveals that "Nabo" was in fact the latest-published story of the collection (March 1951);<sup>3</sup> by that time, García Márquez was already moving

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Donald McGrady, "Acerca de una colección desconocida de relatos por Gabriel García Márquez," *Thesaurus: Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo* 27 (1972): 305; he notes that the story represents in part "a protest against the social prejudice of the white people" (trans. mine). See also Raymond Williams, *Gabriel García Márquez* (Boston: Twayne, 1984) 21: "the realm of the story is the concrete empirical world rather than the fantastic." Mario Vargas Llosa, in "A Morbid Prehistory (The Early Stories)," *Books Abroad* 47. 3 (1973): 459, comments as well that "the structure, language, and even subject matter are still somewhat foreign," but also notes that "it matters little."

<sup>2</sup> García Márquez's first novel, *Leafstorm* (1955), and the related short story, "Monologue of Isabel Watching It Rain in Macondo" (1955), explore in detail this concept of co-existing yet completely separate realities; other short stories of the *Eyes of a Blue Dog* collection ("Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers," "The Night of the Curlews," "Someone Has Been Disarranging These Roses," "Eva Is Inside Her Cat," and "Dialogue with the Mirror") also involve the intrusions of one world into another, and the resulting fear or confusion on the part of the protagonist.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Gilard, "Recopilación y prólogo," in Gabriel García Márquez, *Obra periodística I: Textos costeños* (Barcelona: Bruquera, 1981) 68.

away from the strong Kafkaesque elements of the earliest stories—in which the supernatural events tend to be frightening and often nightmarish<sup>4</sup>—and towards what will be a more characteristic exploration of the themes of isolation and solitude.

The story, told through various narrative voices and a disrupted chronology, describes the life of a young black servant who is hired to groom the horses, but who also sings and cares for a "mute girl" (who in fact seems severely retarded, since she is also described as "the little dead and lonely girl who listened to the gramophone looking coldly at the wall until we lifted her out of the chair and took her to her room"<sup>5</sup>); Nabo is instructed to sing to her and to wind the gramophone. On Saturdays Nabo is in the habit of going to the town square to hear a black saxophonist, who one day disappears without warning. After Nabo is injured by a horse while brushing its tail, and is then locked in a room and fed like an animal for fifteen years, the saxophone player appears repeatedly to him, revealing that he is an angel who invites Nabo to join the chorus. Thus, levels of existence and spheres of action work alongside or against each other from the beginning.

The reality of each individual character is clearly denied to the others. For example, the "mute girl" by the end of the story is thirty years old but is still referred to as a girl: "She hadn't grown, she was over thirty and was beginning to get sad in her eyelids" (74). She resides in the "world of the living room," ignored but protected, while Nabo is tied up and locked in a hay-filled room; the only sign that he is alive is an empty plate that appears from beneath the door three times a day; in the words of the narrator/character, "we weren't cold-blooded enough to kill him in any other way" (73). This narrator/character coexists with both of these worlds, but penetrates into neither; he ignores the servant, and says dispassionately that once he gave up hope for the recovery of the girl, "she ceased to pain us" (71).

This type of juxtaposition is not new to García Márquez's fiction; what separates this story from the previous ones is the narrative strategy which reinforces this idea. The story is told in two distinct narrative voices—one an omniscient narrator who reveals the thoughts and actions of Nabo and the words of the angel, and the other a character, presumably a resident of the house, who always speaks in the first-person plural. The use of the "we" narrative voice, indicating an indistinct individuality, also appears in two other short stories of this collection.<sup>6</sup> Here, its effect is to exculpate the narrator from any blame for the treatment either of Nabo or of the girl, to show that his assumptions about them are also collective and therefore more objective assumptions. This narrator does not appear until one-third of the way through the story; by that time, the reader is accustomed to the unannounced narrative shifts from the present (fifteen years after the accident) to the past, which recounts both the accident itself and details of Nabo's life before that.

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<sup>4</sup> Gilard 63-64. The less Kafkaesque stories already published by 1951, according to this chronology, were "The Woman Who Came at Six O'clock" (June 1950) and "The Night of the Curlews" (July 1950).

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, "Nabo: The Black Man Who Made the Angels Wait," in *Collected Stories*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper, 1984) 71. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> See "Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers" and "The Night of the Curlews."

Generally these narrative articulations are not even marked by paragraph breaks, but rather blend smoothly into one another; regularly alternating segments depict the present and relate different episodes from the past. Only by mentally re-arranging these fragments can the reader identify the girl's grasp of reality, Nabo's own view of his life, and the perspective of the angel consistently prodding Nabo from his stupor. The appearance of the "we" narrator provides the longest uninterrupted segment of narration, and forms the central third of the story; he chronologically recapitulates the events mentioned earlier, and since he lives outside the worlds of both Nabo and the girl, it may be said that he presents the "real" perspective, the external and objectively accurate one.

As Vargas Llosa explains in his analysis of the story, this question of the definition of reality lies at the center of the story's interpretation. For example, he discusses as follows the issue of the objective reality of Nabo's angel-friend: "The specter of the dead saxophone player . . . could simply be a hallucination occurring in the mind of the protagonist, in which case that part of the story would be taking place on a 'subjective' plane within an 'objective' reality. But there is another possibility, namely that the dead saxophone player is . . . not a mental vision but a miraculous or fantastic being. If this is indeed the case, then the present portion of the story is occurring within a subjective reality, and the events narrated by this tale are no longer objectively real, but part of an 'imaginary' reality."<sup>7</sup> In these terms, the latter interpretation links this story to the mature fiction of García Márquez, while the former looks back to the psychological emphasis of his early short stories.

In fact, the entire story functions on these separate planes of reality, with no implication that any characters' experiences are mere mental projections of other characters; the child, the saxophone player, Nabo, and the collective narrator live in separate worlds, adjacent and equal to that of the others. Nabo is the only character who manages to belong at some time to each of the worlds represented in the text, although significantly his shifts between them are always unconscious. When he belonged to the world of the white men, he had to reconcile his role as stable boy with two other strong attractions: one towards the mute girl, and the other towards the black saxophone player. Both of these worlds extended temporary bridges to Nabo, offering him partial respite and carrying him into other physical spheres as well—the parlor and the park. The common element of music ties together the three worlds, since Nabo also sang while brushing the horses. Both the child and the musician felt his presence: his name was the only word the girl ever uttered, and the saxophone player reveals later that during his park concerts "I never saw you, but later on, when I stopped coming, I felt as if someone had stopped watching me on Saturdays" (73). However, Nabo was completely unaware of his effect on either the musician or the child; when the collective narrator expresses surprise at the girl's new-found ability to wind the gramophone herself, the only action of which she has ever been capable, Nabo merely shrugs his shoulders and says: "She's been winding it for a long time now" (72).

After his accident, Nabo is separated from these two concrete worlds both physically and mentally, but two other worlds continue to struggle for dominance:

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<sup>7</sup> Vargas Llosa 458.

the life of idiocy, which he now seems to share, and the angelic chorus to which he has been invited; notably, these two realities are represented by the same two characters, the aging girl and the presumably dead saxophone player. Nabo never embraces either one, but rather clings to the life he has left behind: he insists that the fifteen years have not passed, and that he must resume his duties in the stable. The story understates all of Nabo's movements between worlds; the disruption of chronological sequence in the narration makes Nabo's uniqueness in this respect even more difficult to perceive. In terms of narrative stance, the omniscient narrator shows no surprise at any events, while the collective narrator lacks any insight at all into Nabo's character. The difference of attitude between the two narrative voices is most clearly seen in the descriptions of Nabo; while the omniscient narrator relates Nabo's coherent, if simple, movements and conversations, for the narrator/character the servant has ceased to be anything more than a brutish animal: "we'd locked him up as if he were a horse, as if the kick had passed the sluggishness on to him and encrusted on his forehead was all the stupidity of horses: animalness" (73).

As noted above, the leitmotif of music is the element connecting Nabo to the realities of other characters; it proves significant that the collective narrator reveals a complete insensitivity to Nabo's gift of singing, the very gift which makes the angels seek him out for their chorus. The collective narrative voice states matter-of-factly: "Nabo said that he could sing. But that didn't interest anyone. What we needed was a boy to curry the horses" (71). Thus, the presumably objective narrator possesses less insight even than Nabo, and reveals himself to be impervious to the only possible means of communicating with the other characters. It then becomes ironic that he speaks with a plural voice, implying solidarity when in fact it is he—or they—who is isolated from the worlds of Nabo, the mute girl, and the saxophone player. Thus what the reader has come to accept as objective reality proves to be limited in both scope and depth.

As Mary Kilmer-Tchalekian has noted, "Nabo" marks the literary beginning of García Márquez's experimentation with the relativity of time.<sup>8</sup> This relativity reinforces the concept of separate worlds; for the angel, "centuries" have passed since the accident; the collective narrator states that fifteen years have passed; but for Nabo and the girl, no time seems to have passed at all. These juxtapositions of conceptions of time reinforce the spatial separations of the story, and emphasize again the gaps between the worlds of the characters. The blurring of distinctions between objective and subjective realities is furthered by the fact that, like Nabo, neither the omniscient nor the collective narrator perceives any ambiguity at all; they never doubt their possession of complete "truth." For example, regarding the above-mentioned issue of the real existence of the angel, there are no indications from the objective narrator that that character is any less real than are Nabo and the child. In fact, the narrator distinguishes between the first appearance of the angel and Nabo's still-rational mental hypotheses; he says that when Nabo heard the voice he "must have imagined that the animals were somewhere in the darkness" (68), and then that he "imagined that the person speaking to him was doing it from outside the stable, because the door was closed from the inside and

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Kilmer-Tchalekian, "Nabo, el negro a quien García Márquez hizo volar," *Journal of Spanish Studies: 20th Century* 6 (1978): 31.

barred" (68-69). These reasonable doubts, and final acceptance, lend credibility to Nabo's sanity; the careful reader must then doubt that the angel is a mere hallucination, in spite of the fact that Nabo did seem to hallucinate immediately following the original accident. This element of the story's structure, leaving the interpretation to the reader rather than allowing the characters to pose the questions explicitly, marks a significant shift away from the earlier fiction and towards the impassive narrative style of García Márquez's later work.

The final third of the story contains the crescendo towards the dramatic and explosive ending. Thus far, no action at all has occurred in the present, with the exception of the dialogue between Nabo and the angel. Since the accident, there has been no physical or verbal contact between Nabo and the world outside his door. But the day after someone opens the door to see if he is still alive, the angel, tired of waiting for the servant to join him, performs the physical act of opening the door of Nabo's room to set him free. As he runs instinctively towards his familiar world of the stable, "like a blindfolded horse" (76) and then "like a blindfolded bull" (77), Nabo also reaches one last time into the consciousness of the now-adult "girl," for as she sees him run by she utters the final words of the story; "without moving from the chair, without moving her mouth but twirling the crank of the gramophone in the air, [she] remembered the only word she had ever learned to say in her life, and she shouted it from the living room: 'Nabo! Nabo!'" (77).

The style of this final paragraph, a single sentence which pours out like a torrent for two pages, reflects the tumbling and confused consciousness of the protagonist, as his worlds collide. At that moment, he unites physically as well as mentally all of the worlds or realities presented in the story: he runs through his own room, through the house presumably inhabited by the narrator, past the room of the mute girl, and towards the stable. Ironically, this climactic moment also represents Nabo's breaking point, as he falls into the stable, "on his face, in his death agony perhaps, but still confused by that fierce animality that a half-second before had prevented him from hearing the girl" (77). Thus the story ends on a note of complete solitude, as Nabo and the idiot are separated for the last time.

In spite of this moment of final degradation, Nabo remains the character who could move freely among these closed worlds, by means of a kind of unconscious or innate sensitivity which made him perceive more, but perhaps understand less, than did the other characters. While these moments of the fusion of subjective realities employ narrative techniques far more obtrusive than those of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is clear that these concepts find resonance in the later novel, in that most characters possess only a partial awareness of the total reality that surrounds them; in his moment of awareness, the last Buendía finds only death for himself and his entire family line, as it seems that complete awareness lies just beyond the grasp of García Márquez's characters. Yet it is only in this early fiction that the reader is permitted to examine the consciousness of the characters themselves, to understand the individual elements which may compose the collective world of Macondo.