

Hemingway and García Márquez: Two Shipwreck Narratives

Harley D. Oberhelman, Texas Tech University

García Márquez is one of many contemporary writers who owes a direct debt to Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) as a model for his fiction, especially his short fiction. Their only encounter took place on the Boulevard St. Michel in Paris when the two came face to face for a few brief seconds on a spring morning in 1957. Three years earlier Hemingway had received the Nobel prize, and the young García Márquez could only think of one word to shout as a greeting: "Maaaaaestro!" Hemingway replied: "Adiósos, amigo!" Years later García Márquez was to cite Hemingway as a major influence on his early short fiction.¹ This admission is borne out by the pieces themselves, with their spare, minimal prose that captures life's disturbances and moments of solitude and evokes emotions in bits of dialogue or in the slightest of gestures. Regina Janes states that García Márquez transferred his stylistic allegiance to Hemingway, the master of effaced narration who had learned much about leaving things unspoken (FG 29). The French critic Jacques Gilard, as well as George R. McMurray, suggests that García Márquez's *Relato de un naufrago* (*The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*) was inspired by Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.²

The most memorable series García Márquez wrote for the Bogotá newspaper *El Espectador* in 1954 was the fourteen installments that recounted the story of a Colombian sailor, Luis Alejandro Velasco, one of eight crewmen of the destroyer *Caldas*, who had fallen overboard and disappeared during a putative storm in the Caribbean in February of 1955. These fourteen articles appeared during the period April 5-22 and represented an intense period of writing in order for García Márquez to satisfy his avid reading public. The newspaper's circulation almost doubled during April, and readers scrambled to buy back issues. The series was so popular that *El Espectador* reissued all the installments in a special edition that printed more copies than any other previous Colombian newspaper. This edition was illustrated with photographs the survivors had taken on the high seas; one could easily see some boxes of contraband merchandise with their factory labels on the top deck.

Velasco's story contained a political and moral time bomb that enraged both the navy and the government of the dictator, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Velasco related that the *Caldas* was returning to Cartagena from Mobile, Alabama, where it had been for eight months while its electronic equipment and gunnery were being repaired. The alleged storm caused the eight crewmen to be washed overboard about two hours before the *Caldas* arrived in Cartagena. But ten days later Ve-

¹ Plinio Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *The Fragrance of Guava*, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1983) 31-32. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation FG.

² This information was provided in personal correspondence with the two critics.

lasco washed up half dead on the coast after having drifted on a raft without food or water for more than a week. He was later given a hero's welcome in the capital, but after twenty six-hour interviews with García Márquez it came out that the cause of the accident was not a storm at all, but rather the shifting of the boxes of luxury contraband articles on the ship's deck during rough seas. This revelation caused the wrath of the navy as well as the government of Rojas Pinilla. Disclaimers were printed on the first page of the April 27 edition of *El Espectador*, but the newspaper nevertheless published the special edition the next day together with the telltale photographs. In 1970 García Márquez reprinted the series as a book called *Relato de un naufrago* (*The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, 1982). It included a prologue that left no doubt about the author's polemical intent. "The account, like the destroyer, was loaded with ill-secured moral and political cargo," García Márquez added.³

The dictatorship countered with a series of drastic reprisals that months later resulted in the closure of the newspaper. Despite pressure and threats, Velasco refused to recant a single word of his story. He was forced to leave the navy, and some months later a reporter found him working in a Bogotá bus station. Life had passed him by, but the aura of a hero who had told the truth persisted. When Rojas Pinilla caused the eventual shutdown of *El Espectador*, García Márquez, working as a correspondent in France at the time, was forced to begin a nomadic exile, drifting like Velasco on the raft of financial insecurity without the salary he once received from the newspaper. Two years later the dictatorship collapsed and the nation "fell to the mercy of other regimes that were better dressed but not much more just" (SS ix).

The Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway's 1952 masterpiece, most certainly was the inspiration for *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*. Jacques Gilard believes that García Márquez wrote *Sailor* as if he had accepted a challenge to compete with Hemingway.⁴ Gilard establishes that García Márquez's reading of *Old Man* in translation as published by *Life en español* caused him to reevaluate Hemingway's contribution to literature in a more favorable light.⁵ This early reading of Hemingway occurred between 1952 and 1953 when García Márquez was selling encyclopedias in the heat of Riohacha on the Guajira Peninsula. He no doubt recognized *Old Man* as a major work—one that was to restore Hemingway's flagging reputation and facilitate his nomination for the Nobel prize two years later. Gerry Brenner sees it as a masterwork that "speaks across historical periods to a broad range of readers . . . [and] deals freshly or complexly with recurrent human issues."⁶ *Old Man* engages readers emotionally and intellectually, Brenner believes, while at the same time they measure its treatment of such issues against the yardstick of daily existence. It is generally granted that García Márquez was in-

³ Gabriel García Márquez, *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, trans. R. Hogan (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) viii. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation SS.

⁴ Personal correspondence: Jacques Gilard to Daniel Lackey, October 4, 1991.

⁵ Jacques Gilard, "Introduction," in Gabriel García Márquez, *Obra periodística: Textos costeños* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1981-84) 2: 64 n76.

⁶ Gerry Brenner, *The Old Man and the Sea: Story of a Common Man* (New York: Twayne, 1991) 28. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear after the abbreviation B.

spired by the theme and style of *Old Man*, a work fresh in his memory when he was suddenly called on to interview Velasco and interpret his odyssey.

In *Old Man*, Santiago, who has fished the Gulf Stream for decades, is in his eighty-fourth day without landing a fish. For the first forty days he was accompanied by a young friend, Manolin, but the rest of the time he has fished alone. On the eighty-fifth day he ventures out farther than usual and successfully hooks a giant marlin. An epic struggle ensues that is to last three days. Santiago is called upon to use all of his strength and experience to capture the prize. It is not until the afternoon of the second day that he finally sees the mighty fish break above the water with a gigantic leap. Santiago and the enormous marlin—two feet longer than his skiff—momentarily confront each other. Finally, on the third day Santiago works him close enough to the skiff to harpoon him and secure him to the boat for the journey home.

The third day brings another confrontation, this time with a great shark and a school of scavenger sharks that rip off huge chunks of the marlin's flesh. Santiago clubs them desperately until he loses his last weapon. "Now it is over, he thought. They will probably hit me again. But what can a man do against them in the dark without a weapon?"⁷ Santiago sails into the harbor late on the third day with the skeleton of the great fish lashed to the side of his vessel. He stumbles back to his shack and is asleep when Manolin looks in on him the next morning. He brings Santiago some hot coffee, and they make plans to go out fishing again.

There is a presumed basic difference between *Old Man* and *Sailor*: The former is a product of Hemingway's invention while the latter is a written account of Velasco's retrospection. Neither of these hypotheses is entirely correct. In a letter to *Esquire* dated April 1936, Hemingway recounts an episode that was to provide him with the basic plot of *Old Man*: "Another time an old man fishing alone in a skiff out of Cabanas hooked a great marlin that, on the heavy sashcord handline, pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by fishermen sixty miles to the eastward, the head and forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of the fish, less than half, weighed eight hundred pounds. The old man had stayed with him a day, a night, a day and another night while the fish swam deep and pulled the boat. When he had come up the old man had pulled the boat up on him and harpooned him. Lashed alongside, the sharks had hit him and the old man had fought them out alone in the Gulf Stream in a skiff, clubbing them, stabbing at them, lunging at them with an oar until he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all that they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked him up, half crazy from his loss, and the sharks were circling the boat" (B 28-29).

While the fisherman in this anecdote is not Santiago, his ordeal sketches a story line to which Hemingway adds such qualities as endurance, self-sufficiency, love, and respect for the noble creature represented by the giant marlin. Santiago is an idealized, archetypical hero, even a saint if one considers that his name translates as "Saint James," the patron saint of Spain, an apostle, and also a fish-

⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952) 130. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *OM*.

erman. Hemingway's Santiago was born in the Canary Islands, off the coast of Africa. (It is worth noting that Santiago on several occasions dreams about the lions he saw as a young man on visits to the nearby African mainland.) Santiago left his native islands to bring his heroic values to Cuba, much like thousands of others who emigrated from Spain and settled there before him. It is generally believed that Hemingway based the character of Santiago on Carlos Gutiérrez and Gregorio Fuentes, his mates on the yacht *Pilar*, both born in the Canary Islands.⁸ García Márquez reports in his 1981 *New York Times Book Review* article that Hemingway spent a great deal of time in the rugged fishing village of Cojímar, just east of Havana, where he could observe the daily life of the men he was to immortalize in the person of Santiago.⁹ A few days after Hemingway's death the fishermen of Cojímar erected a bust of their friend in the plaza, now called Plaza Hemingway. It faces one of the docks where Hemingway moored the *Pilar*.

Earl Rovit believes that "the saga of Santiago is an attempt, among other things, to represent the 'whole' of man's experience through a system of symbolic correspondences."¹⁰ Hemingway once told a reporter, "I tried to make a real old man, a real boy [Manolin], a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things" (R 70-71). He followed the traditional pattern of the quest or the journey that ultimately produces a higher level of reality, the "real thing," i.e., a transcendent level of being. His original premise, however, is based on what he observed in Cojímar and while fishing in the Gulf Stream. *Old Man*, therefore, is based on "real" events and people in much the same manner utilized by García Márquez in *Sailor*. Both share a common thesis: the winner must take nothing. Santiago "wins" the giant marlin, in the end stripped of its flesh by scavenger sharks; Velasco "saves" his life only to suffer repudiation by the dictatorship when he discloses the "real" course of events aboard the *Caldas*.

In the epigraph to his 1933 collection of fourteen bitter stories, *Winner Take Nothing*, Hemingway writes: "Unlike all other forms of lutte or combat the conditions are that the winner shall take nothing; nor . . . shall there be any reward within himself." This concept is closely related to Hemingway's use of the term *nada* (nothingness), the ominous, terrifying absence of meaning to which all human beings must respond. Velasco in *Sailor*, Santiago in *Old Man*, and humanity in general face the bleak chaos of the *tabula rasa*. The nothingness of Velasco's life after the government repudiates him is a clear case of life imitating art; Santiago faces the nothingness of a marlin's skeleton, but he responds by planning another fishing expedition with Manolin.

When the fourteen installments that were to make up *Sailor* first appeared in 1955, it was apparent that the principal intention was to entertain the reading public. Rojas Pinilla's government had a severe censorship code in place, and the opposition press could attack the state only in an indirect fashion. The inclusion

⁸ Angel Capellán, *Hemingway and the Hispanic World* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1977) 109-10.

⁹ Gabriel García Márquez, "Gabriel García Márquez meets Ernest Hemingway," *New York Times Book Review* 26 July 1981: 1, 16-17.

¹⁰ Earl Rovit and Gerry Brenner, *Ernest Hemingway* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 69. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation R.

of photographs of the contraband in the April 28 special edition further exacerbated the tenuous relationship between the government and *El Espectador*. Another consideration is that the series was first published under the general title *La verdad sobre mi aventura* (The Truth about My Adventure), and Velasco was clearly named as author. First Velasco and later García Márquez, as well as the entire staff of *El Espectador*, were to encounter the vengeance of the Rojas Pinilla dictatorship that closed down the newspaper from 1956 to 1958. However by 1970, when the series was published as a book, García Márquez assumed the full responsibility of authorship for *Relato de un naufrago* and included a prologue, "La historia de esta historia" (The History of This Chronicle). He asserts that it would have been politically dishonest to halt publication of the series in 1955 simply because it offended the government; the dictatorship was therefore forced to satisfy itself by patching up the truth with rhetoric and misrepresentation (SS viii).

The 1970 edition of *Sailor* and its 1986 English translation include a long subtitle: [*The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*] *Who Drifted on a Life Raft for Ten Days Without Food or Water, Was Proclaimed a National Hero, Kissed by Beauty Queens, Made Rich through Publicity, and Then Spurned by the Government and Forgotten for All Time*. Its mock-epic subtitle recalls the cry of a huckster at a rural fair or a town crier centuries ago. It pokes fun at Colombia's penchant for worshipping beauty queens while at the same time it sketches an outline of the story's contents. It moves the journalistic series into the realm of creative writing with both a serious and a festive intent and confirms the thesis that the story is Velasco's, but the style and method are in every respect García Márquez's design.

Sailor clearly falls into the category of the nonfiction novel, a genre popular both in the United States and Spanish America in recent years. George McMurray places it within the boundaries of "the so-called New Journalism" and describes it as topical journalism, tied to particular events and combining "detailed, factual observation with stylistic techniques, structures and, on occasion, authorial imagination typical of fiction."¹¹ It is an attempt to convert the amorphous material of real experience into art. Within the categories of the nonfiction novel, *Sailor* is a clear example of the testimonial novel in which the author or the individual interviewed by the author (Velasco, in this instance) is the first-person narrator of the work. Readers of the García Márquez novel are likely to see Velasco as the true hero, whose survival against all odds demonstrates an unusually high degree of courage, determination, and physical strength often associated with the prototypical hero of the testimonial novel. In this respect Hemingway's Santiago bears comparison with Velasco, especially in view of García Márquez's well-known admiration for Hemingway at the time he interviewed the Colombian seaman.

Sailor makes use of a classic genre, the narrative of shipwreck, in which the castaway experiences a broad range of feelings: hunger, solitude, thirst, and survival anxiety. It continues this traditional shipwreck genre as cultivated by Melville, Stevenson, Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca, and Cervantes. While Hemingway's *Old Man* is not technically a shipwreck tale,

¹¹ George R. McMurray, "The Nonfiction Novel and García Márquez's *Relato de un naufrago*," *Antipodas* 4 (Dec. 1992): 111.

without a doubt it does provide García Márquez with short, exemplary sentences as a model for his prose, a gripping story line, images and similes in accord with the barren waters that encircle both protagonists, and an exploration of the twilight zone between reality and fantasy.