Criticism in Art: A View from the Diaspora[1]

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WHEN GABRIEL MARQUEZ'S *One Hundred Years of Solitude* appeared in hardback in Britain, it did not cause a stir. The later rave reviews came as an echo of American appreciation. If the American intellectual establishment thought it a splendid novel, it must be, since their approval was regarded as the ultimate accolade. The fact is, European critics faced a dilemma, for the critical norms they had inherited did not apply readily to this quasi-mythical tale. No doubt the emotional reaction—that is the aesthetic reaction—of many suggested something unusual. But can you take the risk of praising a book which does not yield to accepted critical analysis?

It was much easier to deal with *Autumn of the Patriarch*, Marquez's next book, since the first had set an unimpeachable, if uncomfortable precedent. Quasi-mythical books like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had long established themselves as classics, notably in China and Europe. We are familiar with de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Rabelais's *Gargantua*; so whence the problem? I believe that the problem lies with the label "novel," which is seen by Europeans as a European invention, incorrectly, I might add. The novel, a long story in prose, must either be traditional, with its hero, concessions to characterization, balance, and so on. Or, failing that, it must fall under the rubric "avant-garde"; that is, it must challenge the rules, by going forward. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* went backward, to rediscover the mythic mould.

In fact, Marquez did not go back at all. He created a story that projected the preoccupations of many Columbians. Similar mythic preoccupations belong to the pork-nocker tradition of storytelling in Guyana, which has incorporated Amerindian lore

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figures like Masacurruman and Bush Dai Dai. Wilson Harris's novels belong, implicitly at least, to this tradition and convey, at times, hypnagogic evocations that "make your head grow," to use a popular expression.

What I have said is an oblique challenge to European criticism which, in my view, is necessarily limited. This is the thesis which I seek to establish before dealing with some relevant historical material.

The bane of philosophical thought is the separation of disciplines. Analytical psychologists do not like thinkers from other disciplines meddling in their business, believing that it is too abstruse to accommodate the intervention of, say, a mere traveller. Yet, it was not a psychologist who unlocked the mystery of the atavistic dream. It has been suggested that the dream of falling, common to all culture, can be traced back to the experience of primates that live or sleep in trees and do, occasionally fall to the ground. The background cause of the human dream lies in the distant past and, therefore, has the force of archetype.

It is precisely this separation of disciplines which, in some ways, bedevils the thinker from an industrial society. The psychiatrist would wince if it were suggested that he can take no more than a step into the house of the psyche unless he or she is also an anthropologist. (Yet those who have come into contact with neolithic or pre-neolithic people are astonished at the modes of thought which, lost to industrial man, play an active part in the day to day lives of these people).

I would like to say something about abstract painting in connection with this problem. Among Amerindians, abstractions characterize their designs on clay pots. To them, however, they are not abstractions but reductive representations of lizards, jaguars, bush hog, and other animals. To the extra-cultural eye many of these figures seem to be little more than arbitrary lines. However, an explanation usually discloses the resemblance with the animal represented, slight as it might be.

There is another type of "abstraction" found in pre-neolithic paintings: those of Australia's first inhabitants and the Bush-men of the Kalahari desert. The dots, dashes, and geometric shapes which often adorn their figurative inventions puzzled

researchers for a long time, until it was found that these shapes are identical with figures seen in the early stages of a trance to which many people in such societies fall prey. (It is interesting that one of the qualifications for becoming a shaman is the ability to fall readily into a trance). Anyway, the point is that the solution to the problem of abstract adornment among pre-neolithic groups was found by an anthropologist, not by an art critic. I must stress that pre-neolithic people do *not* make abstract paintings as such.

How can we apply this lesson of inter-disciplinary assistance to literary criticism? I have already mentioned the reluctance of depth psychologists to admit strangers into their sanctuary of sanctuaries. Yet, they take it upon themselves to do to others what they abhor in others. It was Freud who made some curious sallies into Shakespearean criticism, claiming, for instance, that Hamlet hesitated to kill his father's murderer because he was the victim of an Oedipus complex. Heaven forbid!

Let us suppose that there is truth in Herr Freud's analysis. Is there a social—anthropological if you like—explanation for Hamlet's hesitancy? I think there is. It seems to me that Shakespeare's four finest tragedies are ego dramas; that is, they deal with problems of ego adaptation. Hamlet's father belongs to that vendetta society in which the individual had little choice of action. He usually took up the same work as his father, and in the absence of an all-embracing public law, pursued a vendetta against anyone who wronged a member of his family. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the movement to the towns must have dealt a blow to the group personality, which held family loyalty in high regard. Shakespeare's glimpse of the new ego personality (the "me" person is now a current description of it) offered unheard-of possibilities in character and relationship analysis. Hamlet held back from carrying out his father's wishes because he was a man of a new generation, who saw his own survival as, if not paramount, at least important. Hence his fatal hesitation. Welcome as Freud's extra-disciplinary excursion into literary criticism is, it is nonetheless hampered by psychological narrow-mindedness.

Now I must say something specific about the Caribbean position and the effect of certain influences on Caribbean art and criticism. Receptivity to extra-cultural influences is necessary to all growth, economic, social, or cultural. The deeply affecting personal verse that goes by the name of "lyric poetry" was brought to Europe from the Middle East by the Crusaders. Chinese literature was deeply influenced by the cultures with which China came into contact, notably by the Vietnamese, and so on and so forth. Usually, the absorption of such influences leads to an art which, though clearly new, is recognizably indigenous. The best Caribbean novels are a case in point. The peculiar position of the Caribbean is this: we have been catapulted into the twentieth century—in the technological time scale, that is—thereby placing the artist in a quandary. (The phenomenon is not uniquely Caribbean. The same applies to Persia, Columbia, and most of the countries in Central and South America; but it is nonetheless a problem of great importance). The Caribbean artist who does figurative painting in his homeland, abstract work in Europe, and then, back home, reverts to figurative work, puts no little strain on the critic's sympathy. This dichotomy is not due solely to the notorious schizoid condition of our middle class; and in any case it has, at times, produced art of high sensibility. But it is worthy of note that the African and Indian artists in Africa and India see abstract art as an expression of European twentieth century disillusionment and therefore shun it.

Of course, Africa's salon poets can still call up a vast body of fine traditional poetry, which they can use as a springboard for the imagination. When an African salon poet writes of "leaning on an oil bean," the image is enough to rouse one's envy. The narrative tradition in African painting, (long dead in Europe), is taken up by the Ugandan artist Musani Mujinga in his brilliant canvas, entitled "Greed, Envy and Opportunism."

I believe that beyond the schizoid condition there is a problem that is central to the Caribbean position. Many writers simply have difficulty in deciding what to write about. I recall how, as late as the 1940s, Guyanese poets felt compelled to compose some verse on the Kaiteur Falls, though many of them had never seen

it. I do not believe that there was a preoccupation with the Falls at all. In my view, we dared not look at ourselves. Those who went to live abroad—especially after independence—galvanized by the energy of nostalgia, seized the opportunity to take a good look and found some very fascinating things: for example the wealth of material offered by the cultural modes brought from India, and the possession cults that abound among Afro-Caribbeans in the countryside.

I must hasten to add that there are artists of the younger generation who have no problems in this respect. I am thinking of the painter Angold Thompson and the potter Stephanie Correia, whose work is strongly marked by Amerindian motifs. It is interesting that Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist, still feels the need to speak of Paris and other European capitals, as if they can do anything for the Mexican psyche. Alas, we are still carrying the burden of our recent history, which seems to require that the erstwhile servant should hanker after the erstwhile master.

Now I must say something about Guyana. I was asked recently why I had not written a novel about the Amerindian *in his environment*, rather than in town, an alien world to him. The answer is simple: I can't; in the same way that I cannot, or rather will not write a novel set in Britain. In the first case the Amerindian is on the fringe of my consciousness. In the second, Britain and I have nothing in common except language, which alone, does not constitute culture. Writing about the Amerindian in his environment would be an impertinence; a novel about Britain would be for me—as a cultural person—an irrelevance. I feel strongly that an art work must be the product of psychic familiarity. When I went to Britain my consciousness was already formed—all my dreams were set in Guyana for thirty years thereafter. Having acquired in my lengthy stay in Britain much knowledge about the country and its people, of course I could embark upon a fictional exercise set there; but it would be cerebral. Cerebral because my settled consciousness is no longer culturally receptive. While I would perhaps be more at home trying to evoke the Amerindian way of life, I would, at the same time, be attempting to make a psychological leap that is doomed to failure. Amerindians—those who are not acculturated to the

point of cultural emasculation—see the world in a different way from the urban viewpoint. While we *talk* of respect for the environment they *live* the principle. Furthermore, their morality cannot abide what we might take for granted. Thus, selfishness is seen by them as a vice. Murder, on the other hand, is acceptable if perpetrated in the spirit of vendetta—by the men, that is. As in the industrial society there is male *and* female morality, although we hear very little about the latter. Then there is their attitude to healing, which avails itself to manifold spirits like the spirit of the anteater. In their affinities too, there are startling differences. Walking in the forest, a man might see himself being admired by the monkeys. Amerindians like the Wai Wai do not regard themselves as being above the animal world.

But some knowledge of the Amerindian way of life does not qualify me to place them in a fictional context that suggests I am writing from the inside of their society. Yet, the fact that they are on the fringe of my consciousness means that they are part of my fixed consciousness. And, in learning facts about them, I am adding to that nucleus of familiarity developed in my childhood and youth. Furthermore, a study of Amerindian society has not only taught me the relativity of truth, of aesthetics and morality, but also equipped me for a dispassionate examination of the human condition and some insights into the unexplored countries of the heart. I have also learned, through them, that art had, originally, a magical significance, being a part of ritual. In fact art *was* ritual.

I will illustrate the uniqueness of Amerindian thought by saying something about their storytelling. Until the middle planting period—the middle neolithic period, that is—stories were exclusively mythic. (I am speaking here of stories handed down from generation to generation). The origin of heavenly constellations like the Pleiades was explained in terms of a culture hero's fate. His dismembered body became a constellation. This archetypal preoccupation with mythic subjects is seen in the story of the Egyptian culture hero Osiris, whose body, after being dismembered, was reconstituted by his sister-wife Isis. The reconstitution was the equivalent of the recovery of Osiris's sexual potency and, by extension, the land's fertility. Thus, myth as art

and art as myth persisted into the civilized period. More accurately, into the period beyond the iron age when writing became essential to society's functioning.

This was the time of non-differentiation between the human and the animal world in Amerindian society. Humans in stories married animals and, indeed, not in some condescending recognition that "we, too, are part of the animal world." Oh no! The tiger (the Guyanese word for jaguar) represented powerful spiritual force. It was from the tiger that man stole fire, according to the Amerindian group in Brazil. Married to an Amerindian woman, he, the master of fire making, discovered that her brother had stolen fire from his hearth. And from then on he hated mankind. Apart from the psychological importance of this story—for instance, it foreshadowed the separation of the human and the animal worlds—apart from this, it illustrates the principle of collective unconscious forces. The devouring animal of early planting societies became the god of metal-working societies, so that Aeschylus's fire-stealing Greek culture hero Prometheus had to confront, not the animal power—source of the environment—but the gods made in the image of man himself.

I will remind you here that I am pursuing the idea with which I began, namely the persistence of a mythic preoccupation in storytelling, all but dead in Europe and amongst Americans of European extraction. And beyond that, the relativity of aesthetics and criticism, which must go hand in hand with the function of storytelling in a particular society. If there is a certain cross-cultural unity in our reaction to the unfolding of a drama, there is equally a divergence in that reaction, depending upon the perspective of technological time. I said "all but dead in Europe." But let me add that Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* is a powerful twentieth-century quasi-mythic tale entirely suited to the trauma of that unstable continent.

To return to the Amerindians: the Warrau and Arawak of North-West Guyana broke the storytelling mould which interpreted physical phenomena through the interaction between animals and humans to produce stories drawn, not from speculative history, but from history as actually experienced. There are

oral tales among both these tribes which recount the Carib incursion into Guyana via the Orinoco and Waini rivers. We see here the origin of the Homeric-type epic that existed as oral tales centuries before it was committed to writing. Homer's story of the seige of Troy was originally sung, and availed itself of poetic techniques aimed at maintaining the listeners' attention. In this connection, among Amerindians, any lengthy account is, on special occasions, delivered in a sing-song, stylized manner, singing being originally no more than a heightened form of speech. Even today melody is nearly always tied to the word when delivered by the human voice. The importance of this development, namely storytelling as history, brings the form closer to what we know as present day storytelling. But it is not difficult to imagine that the norms of criticism were not the same as today's. Homer held up the narrative thrust in order to recount a character's past or a dream or to follow him into the underworld. Those who have tried unsuccessfully to read Dostoyevsky's remarkable *Brothers Karamasov* are faced with a critical dilemma. How can a novel be described as great when it offends so many accepted norms of criticism? Characters drop out for long periods, their monologues are more suited to the theatre than fiction, and so on.

If in pre-historical times the criterion was the effective evocation of a group's destiny in the world, industrial society judges by the emotional reaction, while attempting to formulate principles to ground this judgement. Unhappily, some start with the principles, expecting the judgement to flow from them.

The Macusi Indians living in the northern Guyanese savannahs tell the story of a giant bat which swoops down at certain times of the year to prey on anyone found in the open at nighttime. We are coming closer to the modern story norm, though the mythic element—in this case the bat of supra-natural proportions—is still indispensable. The realistic content is equally important, however, for bats are a commonplace of the Rupununi savannah, especially the vampire bat, which can transmit rabies through its saliva. The story seeks to explain mysterious disappearances at night.

In Guyana are represented the main stages in the development of storytelling. Sadly, this is not widely appreciated among

coastal Guyanese, who still believe that European storytelling and its bedfellow European criticism are the only acceptable norms.

We should not forget that many old classics radiate a peculiar fascination while ignoring character development, balance, relationships, and many so-called prerequisites to good storytelling. A mischievous critic might even remark that in order to be ranked among the masters of the novel, the European nineteenth-century writer was required to produce badly flawed books, citing Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Balzac as cases in point.

As the title of this paper is criticism in *Art*, I shall now say something about another art form, sculpture, and in so doing, exemplify the thesis I have outlined: namely, that there is no external criterion of judgment, since technological time and cultural uniqueness throw up their own aesthetic.

The sculpture of Nigeria and Zaire covers thousands of years of technological time. To move from an exhibition of the highly stylized Nok sculptures of central Nigeria through the Benin bronzes to Ife sculpture is to travel through the various stages of city state history until we come to its most brilliant flowering. Ife portrait sculpture, both terra cotta and bronzes, are widely acknowledged to be among the finest examples in realistic art. Here I must stop to make a point relevant to my implied plea for arriving at our own judgments. As late as the 1960s Benin bronzes (very few at that) were hidden away among some raffia work exhibits in an obscure room in the British Museum. Even today there is no prominent display of either the Benin or Ife sculptures, a neglect prompted, no doubt, by the need to maintain the fiction of an African South of the Sahara with little that is worthy of mention. The researcher who takes for granted the British Museum's claim to a disinterested vision, backed by a comprehensive collection, will be led up the garden path, an experience that should hardly surprise us.

In Zaire, and indeed throughout West Africa, many sculptured portrait heads are crowned with a bird, a fact that has always puzzled me, just as the child's delight in incessant repetition in storytelling has never been, to my knowledge, satisfactorily explained. This bird symbolism disappears with the advent of the

city state. Again, we are in the grip of a development caused by technological change.

The Zairean village sculptor who carves stylized heads crowned with birds will not feel at home attempting a realistic portrait. The artist is trapped in a cultural mould. Any art work is a cultural product and if progression implies borrowing and receptivity to outside influences, the artist cannot ignore his or her duty to cultural integrity.

Am I teaching my grandmother to suck eggs? There is no doubt that, as far as certain listeners are concerned, I am. But many Guyanese and presumably others still remain convinced of the need for European tutelage in critical analysis, and love to talk of "European and North American appreciation." Is not this the same appreciation that leads a certain well-known British critic to describe Caribbean and African artists as *Commonwealth* artists, thereby denying them their nationality? If the carrot of European publishing is too delectable to resist, let us not make the mistake of devouring its critical wrapping as well. Examine it carefully and you will see it is not what it seems. There will come a time when we will not need to talk about Europe in this way; that is when we have an adequate number of our own publishing houses.

NOTE

1 This paper was delivered at a symposium during the Caribbean Festival of the Arts (Carifesta), Trinidad, August 1992.