

**THE RELIABILITY OF THE NARRATOR IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* AND GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ'S *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE*.**

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In the simultaneously fantastic and earthly world of the magical-realist novel, where telepathic powers are discovered through the clearing of snot, or where girls ascend to heaven while hanging out the laundry, how do the narrators of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* attempt to convince the reader of the narratives' reliability? Can the reader really rely on the truth of such fantastic narratives? If not, what precisely are García Márquez and Rushdie trying to tell us about the nature of supposedly reliable narrative and the truths it purports to contain?

On first reading García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the narrator's reliability in his account of the village of Macondo's supernatural events seems not to be at issue. Most obviously, García Márquez employs an omniscient, third-person narrator with no apparent personal investment in the events, leading the reader to assume no bias or agenda on the narrator's part and that he has no reason to obscure the truth. One particular passage of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which Remedios the Beauty ascends to heaven, illustrates further the techniques used by García Márquez to give the reader an impression of the narrator's reliability:

Amaranta felt a mysterious trembling in the lace on her petticoats and she tried to grasp the sheet so that she would not fall down at the instant in which Remedios the Beauty began to rise. Úrsula, almost blind at the time, was the only person who was sufficiently calm to identify the nature of that determined wind and she left the sheets to the mercy of the light as she watched Remedios the Beauty waving good-bye in the midst of the flapping sheets that rose up with her, abandoning with her the environment of beetles and dahlias and passing through the air with her as four o'clock in the afternoon came to an end, and they were lost forever with her in the upper atmosphere where not even the highest flying birds of memory could reach her. (García Márquez 2000, 242-243)

The narrator gives us an exact time ('as four o'clock in the afternoon came to an end') and provides many small, earthly details of this magical event ('the lace on her petticoats', 'the environment of beetles and dahlias'), impressing his role as an accurate recorder of empirical facts, and thereby presumably reliable. The narrator's passive, matter-of-fact tone in the face of this magical event similarly leaves little room for initial doubt. By recounting this fantastic event calmly, taking no pause for reflection, the narrator dissuades the reader from taking the time to analyse the event with an empirical eye.

This matter-of-fact voice is a typical feature of the magical-realist narrator, as Wendy B. Faris argues in her essay, 'Schehezerade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction':

The narrative appears to the late-twentieth-century adult readers to which it is addressed as fresh, childlike, even primitive. Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted – presumably – as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection. (Faris 1995, 177)

In presenting the events in this 'matter-of-fact way', positioning the empirical alongside the magical with equal narrative weighting (in the reality of the novel, Remedios's ascension is as 'real' as Amaranta's petticoats, and neither the fantastic, nor the mundane seem to be of

particularly special interest to the narrator), García Márquez gives the reader the sense, as Stephen M. Hart puts it in his essay 'Magical Realism: Style and Substance', of a 'self-consistent and water-tight world' where 'the reader is unable to escape from a sense of the world as containing a magical dimension' (Hart 2005, 4). The fantastic and the mundane are so equally balanced in the narrative that it is impossible to imagine Macondo without its magical elements. Furthermore, the different characters' reactions to the magical events go some way to voicing, and then countering, any concerns the reader may have over the factual reliability of the narrative. Following Remedios's ascension, even Fernanda, 'burning with envy, finally accepted the miracle' (García Márquez 2000, 243). The message is clear: if even bitter Fernanda can believe in Remedios's miracle, then the reader can hardly deny it. The narrator also describes how 'outsiders, of course, thought that [...] Remedios the Beauty's] family was trying to save her honour with that tale of levitation'<sup>1</sup> (García Márquez 2000, 243), but the reader is in the privileged position of having *witnessed* the miracle from within the family, and knows better than the 'outsiders' who deny it. By setting the 'outsiders' up as the doubters, incorrect in their assumptions, the reader is cast as a privileged witness to the magical event, and thereby not in a position to deny its truth.

In comparison, an initial reading of Saleem Sinai's first-person narrative in *Midnight's Children* certainly leaves him seeming unreliable or, to use Hart's word, 'slippery' (Hart 2005, 10). Rushdie himself, in his 1983 essay "Errata": or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*, attests to his narrator's flaws: 'It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator' (Rushdie 1991, 22). As opposed to the passive, third-person narrator of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Saleem Sinai is actively and personally invested in his story. Attempting to write his autobiography at thirty, Saleem, as Rushdie puts it, 'wants so to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. [...] He is an interested party in the events he narrates' (Rushdie 1991, 24). Indeed, Saleem makes his agenda explicit from the novel's first page, in his rush to record the events of his life: 'I must work faster, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity' (Rushdie 1995, 9). Various interludes throughout the novel attest to Saleem's desire to portray his life in a certain way and his willingness to bend the truth. Nowhere is this more obvious than near the end of the novel, when Saleem confesses to falsifying a preceding event:

I lied about Shiva's death. [...] I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred. (Rushdie 1995, 443)

Although Saleem admits that 'lying doesn't come easily', and that this is the only 'out-and-out lie' (Rushdie 1995, 443) he confesses to, it is difficult for the reader to trust a narrator who, upon discovering 'an error in chronology' in his own work (whereby his account of the 'assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs [...] on the wrong date'), questions his own ability to narrate faithfully, given his personal investment in the story: 'Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history of my time purely in order to place myself in a central role?' (Rushdie 1995, 166) With this question similarly on the reader's mind, it is impossible not to have some reservations about the truth of the magical elements of the narrative which place Saleem in a starring role, such as his telepathy that allows him to convene and become central to the 'Midnight Children's Conference' (Rushdie 1995, 222).

The nature and extent of Saleem's memory similarly leads the reader to question his reliability as a factual narrator. At the beginning of the novel, Saleem's powerful memory is explained as the result of a supernatural process, the nature of which is mysterious even to himself: 'Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. they believe that Remedios became pregnant and was hidden away by her family.

head, down to the last detail' (Rushdie 1995, 19). This statement, combined with the use of visual detail in Saleem's account of events which have occurred even before his birth (for example, he is able to describe, with remarkable lucidity, his grandfather's appearance as a young man, from his 'sky-eyes' to his 'cyranose'; Rushdie 1995, 13) disarms the reader somewhat. As in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the earthly and the magical are co-dependent, yet Saleem's narrative is not nearly as 'water-tight'; as *Midnight's Children* progresses, Saleem begins to lose grip on his memory, and his ability to convince the reader that his narration is truthful consequently suffers. From professing a supernatural ability to 'fill in the gaps', Saleem begins to question his own memory, rushing to 'confide in paper, before I forget' (Rushdie 1995, 37). We have already noted that doubts may be raised in the reader about the truth of Saleem's role at the Midnight Children's Conference, and these doubts are further compounded when Saleem admits, in the same chapter as his account of the conference, that his memory of that time is slipping up:

It occurs to me that I have made another error – that the election of 1957 took place before, and not after, my tenth birthday; but although I've racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events. This is worrying. I don't know what's gone wrong. [...] if small things go, will large things be close behind? (Rushdie 1995, 222)

Saleem's memory continues to deteriorate, evidenced by the statement he made earlier when trying to recollect the time he hid in Parvati's waste basket: 'Admitting defeat, I am forced to record that I cannot remember for sure' (Rushdie 1995, 386). He ultimately declares:

I'm tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking, arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense anymore. (Rushdie 1995, 422)

With Saleem finally bereft of his supernatural ability to piece together his own 'scraps of memory' and thus resorting to being 'guided by the few clues one is given' (Rushdie 1995, 427), a first reading of *Midnight's Children* is marked by a progressive difficulty to trust Saleem as a reliable narrator of facts.

There are other aspects to Saleem's narrative which appear to be outside his control and damage his reliability on a first reading. Saleem's narrative is intensely hurried, and his speed is motivated by factors over which he reportedly has no control. One of the reasons for his speed is his memory loss. In writing as quickly as possible, Saleem is trying to record his life before he forgets it; his story 'is being saved from the corruption of the clocks' (Rushdie 1995, 38). Saleem's deterioration is also apparently physical: he tells us how he is 'falling apart' (Rushdie 1995, 37), physically cracking into pieces, and this causes his reliability to suffer as a result:

I am racing ahead at breakneck speed; errors are possible, and overstatements, and jarring alterations in tone; I'm racing the cracks, but I remain conscious that errors have already been made, and that, as my decay accelerates [...] the risk of unreliability grows. (Rushdie 1995, 270)

This physical deterioration is linked to Saleem's struggle for control of his own writing process, with characters from his history jostling inside him, struggling to burst out into the narrative, only to be held back by his faltering strength of will: 'midnight's other children [...] are pressing extremely hard. Soon the cracks will be wide enough for them to escape' (Rushdie 1995, 179). At other times the stories are reluctant to be told, with Saleem claiming there are 'stories which I [...] have to drag out of the whirling recesses of my mind' (Rushdie 1995, 106). Saleem's state of mind and his physical deterioration are called into question, when a doctor visits him only to

declare that 'I see no cracks', much to Saleem's incredulous anger: '[H]e impugned my state of mind, cast doubts on my reliability as a witness' (Rushdie 1995, 65). Whether losing his mind or genuinely physically 'falling apart', the result for his narrative is that it becomes, just as Saleem admits, a series of 'events, which have tumbled from my lips any old how, garbled by haste and emotion' (Rushdie 1995, 30). That is to say, the pressing speed with which Saleem is forced to write, coupled with his personal investment in the story at hand, leave the narrative 'garbled', prone to error and factually unreliable. At times capable of intentionally intervening in his story to change facts for his benefit, and at other moments incapable of harnessing his memory to make any factually reliable narrative, Saleem is either playing games with the reader, or he is really suffering deterioration of mind and body, or indeed both. In any case, the result is the same: the reader finds it difficult to rely on 'slippery' Saleem as a narrator.

That is not to say that Saleem's narrative does not contain similar trust-building techniques as those observed in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The problem for Saleem is that his interludes and confessions undermine any factual power he tries to place in his account. He certainly maintains a 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane' (Rushdie 1995, 9) in his narrative, keeping a certain symmetry between empirical logic and the fantastic by recording the exact times of improbable events such as the birth of the Midnight Children. But any suspension of disbelief that this engenders in the reader is, to a large extent, countered by his doubts over the accuracy of his own memory, which we have seen above. Saleem also invites the reader to verify any facts that may be in doubt in the more sensational chapters of the novel ('If you don't believe me, check'; Rushdie 1995, 48), and Saleem's narrative is set in the real context of a country where 'stranger things have been known to happen [...] just pick up any newspaper and see the daily titbits recounting miracles in this village or that' (Rushdie 1995, 55). But once again, this is not enough to allow the reader to trust him fully. Perhaps not all the facts in Saleem's story are false, and stranger things may well be reported in the press, but Saleem's own admission that he has made factual errors and that, in his haste, there is a likelihood of further errors he has failed to notice, undermines any trust the reader can place in him as a reliable narrator.

On the surface, the narrator of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* gives a greater impression of factual reliability than *Midnight's Children's* Saleem Sinai. However, analysing these texts with what Wendy B. Faris calls 'defocalized narrative' (Faris 2004, 45) in mind, we are able to dig deeper and put claims of reliability for both narrators back into question. We have seen how the balancing of the magical and the empirical in the narratives of these novels gives initial credibility to the magical as both elements are treated with the same matter-of-fact voice (this is true more of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* than of *Midnight's Children*, as already discussed). But below the surface of initial impressions, this places the reader in an ambiguous space in terms of the perspective with which to analyse the world of the novel. In general, the magical-realist narrative can be said to be defocalised because the reader is prevented from viewing the world as either fully magical or fully empirical, and is forced into a perspective where both the magical and the empirical exist simultaneously. For Faris, magical realism presents a narrative which is

apparently grounded in sensory data, yet moving beyond them, but not consistently into any recognizable supernatural realm, such as a secret garden, heaven, the underworld, or a mythical past [...] Within it, one does not know quite where one is, what one is seeing, or what kind of voice one is hearing. (Faris 2004, 45-46)

The reader's confused perspective is further compounded, in that the empirical and the magical are not set in opposition to each other, but rather, in a sort of uncomfortable symbiosis, with the narrative simultaneously entertaining and resisting the logic of both worlds. This is illustrated in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, through a conversation between Úrsula and Melquíades, discussing the odour of mercury:

'It's the smell of the devil,' she said.

‘Not at all,’ Melquíades corrected her. ‘It has been proven that the devil has sulphuric properties and this is just a little corrosive sublimate.’  
(García Márquez 2000, 7)

Here García Márquez shows the blurring of lines between the magical and the empirical worlds: instead of countering Úrsula’s superstition with empirical logic (i.e. *the devil’s existence cannot be proven*), Melquíades paradoxically uses empirical reasoning and language to describe a supernatural entity. This plunges the reader into uncertainty as to their own, and the narrator’s, perspective: how to have faith in the facts of this world when the magical and the empirical are so thoroughly intertwined and thereby resist close scrutiny? This ultimately impacts on the reader’s ability to view the narrator as reliable, as Faris argues:

The nature and origin of narrative voice in magical realism, compared with that of its modernist precursors, is more radically destabilized because of the presence of irreducible elements within an otherwise realistic narrative environment. Because it questions the norms of realistic representation that is based on sensory data, the defocalized narrative that results from such a destabilized origin undercuts the assumed reliability of realism from within it. (Faris 2004, 45)

Despite perhaps giving the impression of reliability on first reading, the defocalised magical-realist narrative is ultimately factually unreliable because, from the reader’s uncertain perspective, it ‘cannot be explained, only experienced’ (Faris 2004, 46).

So, what does this mean for the narrator’s reliability in the texts in question? For *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the narrator’s perceived factual dependability stands up only as long as the reader does not dig too deeply beneath the surface. As soon as the reader demands that the events of the novel be ‘explained’ rather than simply ‘experienced’, the narrator’s illusion of reliability is rumbled and begins to unravel. In order to thoroughly analyse the reliability of the narrative, the reader must first be able to situate the narrator, but García Márquez’s narrator is so defocalised that this proves an impossible task. Even as early as the first chapter of the novel, it is impossible to situate the narrator accurately in a constant perspective. First describing Macondo’s present from the point of view of a distant future (‘Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice’), the narrator shifts to viewing Macondo in the present as an outsider, from an almost widescreen perspective, where we discover Macondo as ‘a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water’ (García Márquez 2000, 1). Yet, with the arrival of the gypsies, the narrator is no longer an outsider but narrates events from the perspective of the people of Macondo, commenting on Melquíades’s ‘harsh accent’ (García Márquez 2000, 2): Melquíades and the other gypsies are now the outsiders, with their accents bizarre from the point of view of the people of Macondo, which the narrator now briefly shares.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the narrator’s perspective is in constant flux, which leads to confusion for the reader who is hoping to find the logic of this world (as we have already seen in the conversation between Melquíades and Úrsula concerning the smell of mercury). The narrator is so difficult to locate through the course of the novel that, at the end of the book, when both the village of Macondo and Melquíades’s recorded history of Macondo are destroyed, the reader is left with the problem of how to make sense of what they have just, to use Faris’s word once again, ‘experienced’. As Faris puts it:

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, both the space of the text and the time of its telling are indeterminate. The scribe Melquíades’

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<sup>2</sup> It may be argued that Melquíades represents the narrator’s perspective, as the character in the novel who records the written history of Macondo, but this is questionable considering that, at the outset of the novel, the narrator views Melquíades as foreign.

presence, which figures the scenes of writing and reading within the novel, in conjunction with the ending that conceptually sweeps world and text away, creates a textual space that is difficult to envision clearly. Most obviously, if the whole world of Macondo and its text has disappeared, how can we be reading it now? (Faris 2004, 97)

And it is with this conceptual hole in the narrative's structure – the inability to define the existence of the narrator – that the possibility of the narrator's reliability is torn down. The events of the story are inherently unreliable; [their] existence is literally impossible because no actual narrator could have written and preserved them? (Faris 2004, 123). Certainly, these events are being described by someone from somewhere, but the 'someone and somewhere' are so intangible that it is impossible to interrogate for further detail: the reader is forced to continue with no explanation of the novel's unstable logic, which means that the story of Macondo can never be factually and reliably explained.

What then, is García Márquez's goal in constructing the story of Macondo on such unstable narrative foundations? In his essay, '*Cien años de soledad*: The Novel as Myth and Archive', Roberto González Echevarría sheds lights on this question, discussing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as mimicking the narrative style of anthropological treatise by which twentieth-century Western culture sought to understand Latin America through 'a culling and re-telling of its myths' (González Echevarría 2007, 18). As he explains:

Anthropology translates into the language of the West the cultures of the others, and in the process establishes its own form of self-knowledge through a kind of annihilation of the self. (González Echevarría 2007, 18)

The anthropologist, in order to approach a foreign culture with new eyes, must reduce their own cultural identity to the point where they seem to be discovering the foreign culture not as foreign but as new, primitive and mythic. By making use of the defocalised narrative, García Márquez achieves for his narrator the 'annihilation of the self' that González Echevarría describes. The novel begins with a tone of mythic newness ('The world was so recent that many things lacked names'; García Márquez 2000, 1) and the narrator, as we have seen, is impossible to situate, fitting with the 'level ground of self and history' that González Echevarría explains is necessary at the outset of anthropological narrative (González Echevarría 2007, 21). Faced with this anthropological technique in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the reader is initially able to accept the story of Macondo as myth and thereby prone to contain fantastic elements. Yet by subsequently demonstrating that, despite its illusion of knowledge, such a narrative does not hold up under close analytical scrutiny, García Márquez is ultimately undermining the reliability of the supposedly 'truth-bearing' (González Echevarría 2007, 18) documents used to describe his continent or, in González Echevarría's words, 'the fictions Latin American culture has created to understand itself, the myths about the origins of its history' (González Echevarría 2007, 21).

Elizabeth A. Spiller, in her essay "Searching for the route of inventions": Retracing the Renaissance Discovery Narrative in Gabriel García Márquez', makes a similar point as González Echevarría, arguing that the images of newness and discovery at the beginning of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* ('The treasures that Melquíades first brings to Macondo – the magnet, the telescope, magnifying glass, maps and charts, astrolabes, and sextants – are icons of discovery'; Spiller 2007, 56) represent how Renaissance writers 'such as Columbus, Vespucci, and Pigafetta' (Spiller 2007, 53) first narrated Latin America from a European perspective. For Spiller, the presence of both the magical and the empirical in the text is 'a consequence of the first European responses to America' (Spiller 2007, 52), insomuch as the European Renaissance writers of Latin America

use the term 'marvel' to describe phenomena which they cannot explain. [...] Marvelling is an epistemological passion that exists in the interval between ignorance and knowing. (Spiller 2007, 53)

The narrator of the *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in mimicking the European discovery narrative, exists in this interval too, where events or 'phenomena' can be perceived but are never properly analysed. The destruction of Macondo and the impossibility of its narrative are the ways in which, according to Spiller, 'García Márquez critiques the dangerous nostalgia of Renaissance representations of the New World as a utopian paradise' (Spiller 2007, 58). Just as in González Echevarría's argument, the 'marvelling', discovery perspective used to narrate Latin America is ultimately flawed and unreliable. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the impossibility (and thereby unreliability) of the narrator is implied by the way in which 'García Márquez offers us an allegory of the self-delusion involved in some of the histories we tell ourselves' (Spiller 2007, 59).

Indeed, García Márquez uses *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to highlight the unreliability of the official versions of his country's history. The novel recreates a specific historical event, the 1928 Ciénaga banana massacre, where a strike by an undetermined number of banana workers ended in their massacre, following which a violent military repression and government conspiracy kept the extent of the massacre covered up. The official version of events put forward by General Carlos Cortés Vargas, the commander of the troops involved in the shooting, reported only nine fatalities, despite other reports putting the number of dead at over a thousand (Minta 1987, 169-171). The manipulation of the original facts means that the number of dead in the banana massacre remains somewhat unclear to this day. García Márquez's version of the banana massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seeks to mirror reality by showing the unreliability of the official versions of history. In the novel, the only two witnesses to the massacre, José Arcadio Secundo and the child he saves, are unable to convince others of the truth because

[t]he official version, repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means that the government found at hand, was finally accepted: there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families. (García Márquez 2000, 315)

As in reality, the truth of the past is overshadowed by the government's version of events, which is accepted by an intimidated public. In this way, García Márquez makes clear his scepticism of supposedly reliable versions of the past: events are easily manipulated, even in those official versions of history we are told to trust. The unreliability of the narrator in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reflects this too: a factual version of the history of Macondo is always just beyond the reader's reach.

In light of this interpretation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which dismisses first impressions of reliability, can we conclude that *Midnight's Children's* Saleem is more reliable than the narrator of García Márquez's novel? The fact that Saleem's perspective is more tangible than that of García Márquez's narrator means his existence is at least not in question within the reality of the novel, and thereby his narrative is arguably less defocalised. The defocalisation-effect is indeed lessened in *Midnight's Children*, not only by Saleem's existence as a character but also by his self-awareness and the explanations he gives for the mixed logic of his narrative. He is completely aware of the 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane' (Rushdie 1995, 9) in his story, and warns the reader, from the outset of the novel, that there will be events that will seem unbelievable. Indeed, as we have seen, Saleem describes his supernatural 'trick of filling in the gaps' in his memory, and 'sniffing out the atmosphere in [his] grandfather's house' by using his magical nose, thus giving the reader some explanation of how he can recount things he has not witnessed (Rushdie 1995, 52). Saleem's perspective is, in some way, clear in the sense that he explains to the reader how he can be all-seeing, and thereby accounts for the defocalisation of his narrative and sets it in a seemingly logical framework, albeit a magical one.

Similarly, Rushdie uses the character of Padma, Saleem's companion and audience as he writes his story, to represent, to a certain degree, the reader's concerns over Saleem's reliability as the novel progresses. It is 'our plump Padma' (Rushdie 1995, 24) who questions some of Saleem's more fantastic claims: "What nonsense," our Padma says, "How can a picture talk?" (Rushdie 1995, 45). And Saleem feels, in Padma's temporary absence during part of the novel, that it is her 'earthiness of spirit, which keeps – kept? – my feet on the ground' (Rushdie 1995, 150). Representing, in a way, an empirical perspective with which to view Saleem's narrative, Padma's presence in the background, and Saleem's awareness that he needs to temper his narrative to cater for her critical ear, gives the reader an apparently more concrete perspective to engage with than in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The reader is not lost and confused, as in García Márquez's novel, but is given the time to doubt Saleem and the perspective through which to criticise his reliability. Paradoxically, by showing that he is aware that his story is, in parts, 'unbelievable' (Rushdie 1995, 166), and by catering for an audience that is likely to see it as such, Saleem goes some way to coaxing the reader into believing that his magical-realist narrative conforms to a certain logic.

But again, as with García Márquez's narrator, Saleem's impression of reliability is nothing but illusion. Padma's is no consistently critical mind: she 'accepts without blinking' certain magical elements, such as Reverend Mother being able to 'dream her daughters' dreams' (Rushdie 1995, 55). As Saleem puts it: 'No audience is without its idiosyncrasies of belief' (Rushdie 1995, 55), and Padma's idiosyncrasy is that, while some improbable events she will disbelieve, others she will accept with no criticism. Saleem manages to tailor his narrative to her, and thereby to the reader, not by providing empirical evidence but by coaxing us into submission with the techniques we have seen above, such as claiming that his story is no more unlikely than the miracles reported in his country's newspapers. Similarly, even the magical logic with which Saleem explains his ability to be all-seeing and to record events he has not physically witnessed but 'sniff[ed] out', is undermined by his later claims that his supposed magical memory has abandoned him in his physical and mental decay. Indeed, there is no concrete logic, empirical or magical, to Saleem's narrative, no reasonable way for the reader to understand it fully. Although *Midnight's Children* is held together by the narrator's perspective and self-awareness in a way that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not (in *Midnight's Children* we have a clear present of writing, whereas in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* no such perspective can be imagined), Saleem's narrative is still ultimately defocalised, despite illusions to the contrary, and, once again, 'cannot be explained, only experienced.'

In undermining the possibility of finding factual reliability in Saleem's narrative, Rushdie is commenting on the nature of memory and, similarly to García Márquez, on the potential for unreliability in any document claiming to completely represent factual truth. At one point in the novel, Saleem tells Padma his thoughts on the matter of memory and truth:

'I told you the truth,' I say yet again, 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.' (Rushdie 1995, 211)

What Saleem is positing here, is that the 'version' of events he remembers and records, with the gaps he has filled by one means or another and the bending of facts and alterations he has made to suit himself, represents a form of honesty – based on faith in the truth of one's own memory – which is infinitely more reliable than any narrative which conforms to supposed empirical fact. The novel is peppered with examples of the unreliability of documents claiming factual truth, such as when the country's newspapers falsify an election result:

*And we all lived happily ... at any rate, even without the traditional last-sentence fiction of fairy-tales, my story does indeed end in*



fantasy; because when Basic Democrats had done their duty, the newspapers – *Jang, Dawn, Pakistani Times* – announced a crushing victory for the President’s Muslim League over the Mader-i-Millat’s Combined Opposition Party; thus proving to me that I have only been the humblest of jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case. (Rushdie 1995, 326)

Saleem’s argument is that, in a world where supposed factual documents are deceptive, it is insane to rely on any version of reality other than the one remembered, even with all the flaws that memory has. The novel similarly touches on the futility of seeking to factually record the world. Near the beginning of the novel, the reader meets the old Kashmiri boatman, Tai, who gives this speech to Saleem’s grandfather when asked his age:

‘I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die [...] I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir. Smile, smile, it is your history I am keeping in my head. Once it was set down in old lost books. Once I knew where there was a grave with pierced feet carved on the tombstone, which bled once a year. Even my memory is going now; but I know, although I can’t read.’ (Rushdie 1995, 16)

And Saleem comments: ‘Illiteracy, dismissed with a flourish; literature crumbled beneath the rage of his sweeping hand’ (Rushdie 1995, 16). Tai’s speech here undermines, from the very first chapter of the novel, the futility of any mission to ‘set down’ empirical facts – any document so produced is doomed to become just another of ancient Tai’s ‘old lost books’. Saleem’s narrative is not so much a ‘setting down’ as a ‘setting free’: we have discussed how the story seems, at times, beyond his control; how his memories struggle within him for release, cracking Saleem’s body in the process but, interestingly, leaving him in a calmer mental state after his ‘memory’s truth’ has been freed from the confines of his mind and body. Ultimately, *Midnight’s Children* is not a novel about the facts of Saleem Sinai’s life, but a tale of separating reality’s fiction from ‘memory’s truth’, and a comment on how the telling of stories based on ‘memory’s truth’ can, for all their factual flaws, be trusted as ‘acts of love’ (Rushdie 1995, 461).

In the end, neither *Midnight’s Children’s* Saleem Sinai nor the narrator of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can be relied on to relate factual truth. In trying to give the impression of factual reliability, and then showing how this reliability is an illusion under close scrutiny, Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez are warning the reader to be wary of the ‘truth-bearing’ claims of other types of texts, which, in reality, can be as fictitious, inaccurate and unreliable as the narratives of these two novels. More so, even, in that at least Saleem’s narrative is a recording of his ‘memory’s truth’, coming from a place of honesty – the only form of honesty that he believes it is sane to rely on. Just as Saleem hopes, it is a respect for ‘memory’s truth’ that the reader takes from *Midnight’s Children*. As the reader leaves *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, having ‘experienced’ more than has been ‘explained’ to them, it is with the impression of having just survived the apocalyptic storm which they almost fell into; of having realised in reading that all is not as it should be in the world of Macondo, despite illusions to the contrary, and that they ought not to trust in all they are told.

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