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**POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FORCES IN
COLOMBIAN SOCIETY AS REFLECTED IN THE
LITERATURE OF LA VIOLENCIA**

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If violence, in the words of a well known anti-establishment figure in the United States, is "as American as cherry pie," then in Iberoamerica violence must be as Latin American as the *tamal*, (the banana and coffee). The role of violence in Latin American political and socioeconomic life has been a subject of concern for many writers, both native and foreign. While the present paper sheds little new light on the causes of violence, it offers some observations about the impact, through literature, of mass violence on a nation wracked by bloodshed in the postwar period.

Literature throughout Latin America since World War II has been marked by a preoccupation with the effects of violence on the psyche of individuals living in an atmosphere of disorder, uncertainty and distrust. In his provocative study *Imaginación y violencia en América* Ariel Dorfman contends that this near obsession with violent themes is an inevitable response to the nature of the world in which the Latin American finds himself:

[Latin] America is the fruit of a prolonged violence, of a continuous sacking, of civil and fratricidal war throughout its geography. The world has certain evident dimensions. When we encounter the character for the first time, when we sense him being born in the eyes/womb of the reader, there is already a concrete world surrounding him filled with shadows and fists and rifles, which he holds in awe and perpetuates with decisions. But what involves him...almost like original sin [is] the structure which our fathers have bequeathed us and which they in turn received from their fathers...

To imagine death and avoid it, to imagine death in order to avoid it, that is the first consideration, the one lesson that must not be forgotten.

To survive. Violence is the habitual way of defending oneself, the method which is most at hand, the easiest, at times the only one, to keep from being killed. Learn this, my son, my ancestor tells me, it is what my ancestor says to me, my father, my grandfather, survive.¹

The proclivity for violence is then, in Dorfman's view, virtually a genetic heritage simultaneously reinforcing and being reinforced by the social setting in which Latin American man - and woman - interacts with his fellows. Violence becomes a kind of self-affirmation, a proof of existence: I kill, therefore I am. Following the great psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm, we may grasp this phenomenon better by understanding man's situation as a creature and "his need to transcend" this state of the passive creature. By becoming a "creator" man transcends the role of creature, the accidentalness and passivity of his existence, into the realm of purposefulness and human freedom. But lacking creativity, the ability to care for, even to love that which he creates, how does man solve the problem of transcending himself? The answer, Fromm suggests, is violence: To destroy life makes me also transcend it. Destructiveness is only the alternative to creativeness, an answer to the need for transcendence when the will to create cannot be satisfied.²

Under certain circumstances, then Latin American can turn to this secondary and destructive potentiality, rooted as it is in the very existence of man. He may, in fact, even feel that he has no freedom to choose whether or not to use violence; that his only freedom lies in choosing when and how to employ it. Threatened and isolated, human beings consciously first turn to violence as a form of selfdefense, finding at last that in using the weapon of the enemy they have become a part of that which they feared. But failure to use violence means death or loss of dignity. Confused and frustrated, man releases his pent-up savagery, "affirming his right to be not an object which merely suffers the blows, but one which returns them, differentiating himself from a vegetable or a stone or a dog."³

Whether or not one accepts this explanation of the genesis of violence, there is little doubt that the Latin American political and social scene is characterized by violent and sometimes anomic manifestations of discontent and aggression. Given this fact, it would be truly remarkable if literature did not evidence the effects of a cataclysmic occurrence like *la Violencia*, reflecting life as it does by sifting, refining and imparting order to the sequential but often chaotic chain of events which constitute our experiences. In Colombia an excellent example arises of the impact of historical trauma on the literary consciousness of a people.

II

This essay deals with the suitability of using literature as a tool for understanding Colombian society; to what extent can the novels of *la Violencia* further an appreciation of those factors which make Colombia unique? At the same time, many elements of Colombian life, which are underscored in the literature of *la Violencia*, place that nation unmistakably in the larger community of Latin America.

The study of literature, however, *supplements* the study of history, politics, economics and other disciplines; it does not, and can never replace them. One may amplify his understanding of the forces dominant in a Latin American nation through reading fictional works set in that country, but he must also have the background that allows him to integrate and synthesize the oftentimes contradictory views which two or more authors with the same topic may present. Just as an understanding of the processes and procedures of U.S. government and politics makes for a fuller comprehension of such popular American novels as *Advise and Consent* or *Seven Days in May* (neither of which makes any claim of being great literature), so too does prior knowledge add to the value and total enjoyment of even a masterpiece like Gabriel García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad* or his *La mala hora*.

A caveat: Only a scant handful of the novels of *la Violencia* have been translated into English. For many potential readers, this will present an insurmountable handicap. With the notable exception of the works of García Márquez (excluding, lamentably, *La mala hora*), none of the novels of *la Violencia* has appeared in English. Short stories, drama and poetry, of course, have even less chance of gaining an international audience through translation. Perhaps as an offshoot of the phenomenal international popularity of García Márquez, whose masterpiece has sold more than two million copies throughout the Spanish-speaking world, translations will become more available.

Finally, this paper restricts itself to an examination of *la Violencia* in the novel, with some references to the short story. Those wishing data on drama and poetry relating to *la Violencia* should consult Ernesto M. Barrera, "La violencia en Colombia reflejada en la literatura," a short treatment of these genres.⁴ His short but useful paper is one of the very few to deal with Colombian literature of the nonfictional genres and contains valuable information about *la Violencia* as seen in poetry, drama and even popular music.

III

From its beginning as an independent nation-state, Colombia has been the setting of turbulent and often violent political struggles. Violence

in Colombian politics is coeval with liberation from Spanish authority, but it was with the emergence of the Liberal and Conservative parties in mid-nineteenth century that the use of force to achieve political ends began to acquire an institutionalized base. Although regional caudillos continued to rule over virtual local fiefdoms, partisan identification among the masses gained a national foothold and eventually entire villages would declare themselves "reds" (Liberals) or "blues" (Conservatives).⁵ The claim - basically a justifiable one - of the two parties to a true national status is one of the features distinguishing Colombia from her Latin American neighbors and contributing to the vehemence of party competition there.

Despite the absence of meaningful hierarchy within the parties, lack of organizational centralism, and even - once the formative stages of their development had passed - lack of significant issues to divide them (the standard witticism alleged that Conservatives went to mass at nine and Liberals at ten), so-called third parties have on the masses.⁶ The large scale appeal of the two parties helps explain why, once unleashed, *la Violencia* became impossible to control. Traditionally strong partisan feelings reached unparalleled heights during the carnage which swept the nation.

Coupled with this high degree of partisan identification among the populace was the tendency of Colombia's two parties to attempt perpetration of their rule once they gained power. Unlike many Hispanic American nations where *continuidismo* took the form of attempting to maintain an individual in office beyond his constitutional term, in Colombia the *party* was the beneficiary of such efforts. This of course led the out-party to resort to violence in its bid to oust the opposition incumbents, for conventional electoral methods stood little chance in the face of "managed" elections, the use of governmental organs to repress political adversaries, and other coercive means at the disposal of the party in power, whether Liberal or Conservative.

The bloody civil war which erupted between the parties at the close of the last century (The War of a Thousand Days, 1899-1902) ruined any prospect for Liberal government for thirty years. Only in 1930 was the Conservative stranglehold on power broken, thus initiating a series of Liberal administrations lasting until 1946, a year which some mark as the onset of *la Violencia*. (Many date the violence from 1948, with the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Gaitán providing a convenient bench mark.) In 1946 a split in the Liberal ranks delivered the presidential election to the Conservatives. The subsequent use of official and *quasi-oficial* arms of the state to crack down on political enemies encouraged Liberals to organize into guerilla bands in the countryside, at first in self-defense and later in a kind of undeclared civil war. Guzmán Campos and his associates in their early-1960's study of *la Violencia* estimated that over 200,000 deaths - which many would see as a

conservative figure - can be attributed to the conflict.⁷

La Violencia encompasses several stages and disagreement exists among scholars as to terminology and chronology.⁸ Four or more separate phases can be cited, but for present purposes it is sufficient to point out two major periods of slaughter. The first occurred between 1946 and 1953 and affected most of the country, while the second took place between 1954 and 1958 and was generally limited to what one writer has called the "heartland" of Colombia.⁹

The killing, burning and rapine which soon gained the generic name "*la Violencia*" centered in the countryside. With the notable exception of the Bogotazo (April, 1948), major cities were largely untouched by the unbridled destructiveness which reigned in the rural areas. Efforts to find a monolithic cause for the phenomenon of *la Violencia* have been unsuccessful, though they range from the Freudian to the sociological.¹⁰ What began as a basically partisan dispute - the wish of the new in-party (the Conservatives) to consolidate its power and the equally fervent desire of the newly ousted powerholders (the Liberals) to regain their former status-escalated into a nightmare beyond the control of the party leaders and national party directorates, although this is not to say that all party leaders and directors at all times wished to halt the violence. Politicized peasants, as Bailey points out, "are difficult to predict and likely to be violent."¹¹

The mass reaction which was *la Violencia* was not restricted to assassination for the usual motives of money, politics or personal vendettas - even though these reasons were prevalent. Often the brutality and depravity manifested in the wanton butchering of men, women, children and even animals betrayed a psychopathology beyond the inhuman. It was not enough merely to kill one's enemy; "*No dejar semilla*" (leave no seed) became the unwritten watchword of many of the roving bands terrorizing the backlands, raping nuns, cutting open pregnant women and replacing the fetus with cats, castrating men and taking pride in inventing new ways to dismember their foes. The phrases *corte de mico* (monkey cut), *corte de corbata* (necktie cut) and *corte de franela* (pajama cut) - all gruesome ways of mutilating the cadaver of a vanquished enemy - gained currency as such incidents multiplied.¹²

IV

The imprint this national trauma left on Colombian literature is profound. Such a voluminous outpouring of literary works has resulted from the preoccupation with *la Violencia* that it is impossible to deal here with more than a few representative cases. However, for reference purposes some of the better known novels which treat the theme are,

José Antônio Osorio Lizaraso, *El día del odio*
 Alfonso Hilarión, *Balas de la ley*
 Manuel José Jaramillo, *La aduana*
 Daniel Caicedo, *Viento seco*
 Manuel Mejía Vallejo, *El día señalado*
 Pedro Acosta Borrero, *El cadáver del Cid*
 Euclides Jaramillo Arango, *Un campesino sin regreso*
 Domingo Almorva, *Sangre*
 Tulio Bayer, *Carretera al mar*
 Eduardo Caballero Calderón, *Siervo sin tierra*
 Gonzalo Canal Ramírez, *Nicodemus*
 Arturo Echeverri Mejía, *Marea de ratas*
 Ernesto León Ferreire, *Cristianismo sin alam*
 Gustavo González Ochoa, *Frente a la violencia*
 Soraya Juncal, *Jacinta y la violencia*
 Arturo Laguado, *Danza para ratas*
 Eduardo Santa, *Sin tierra para morir*
 Jaime Sanín Echeverri, *¿Quién dijo miedo?*
 Fernando Soto Aparicio, *Solamente la vida*
 Ernesto León Herrera, *Lo que el cielo no perdona*
 Carlos Esguerra Flórez, *Los cuervos tienen hambre*
 Fernando Ponce de León, *Tierra sin Dios*
 Jorge Vázquez Santos, *Guerrilleros, buenos días*
 Clemente Airó, *La ciudad y el viento*
 Manuel Zapata Olivella, *En Chimá nace un santo* and *La calle 10*
 Jorge Zalamea, *El gran Burundún Burundá ha muerto*
 Alfonso López Michelsen, *Los elegidos*
 Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazábal, *La tara del papa* 13

Undeniably, the quality of such a large volume of works must be uneven. From a strictly literary standpoint many are pedestrian, hastily written, and lack the qualities necessary to lift them above the ranks of quasi-"closet" novels, of importance primarily to the author and his circle of intimates. Nevertheless, although *la Violencia* has not brought forth a true masterwork, it has given us several novels of considerably more than casual interest. Among these are García Márquez' *La mala hora*, *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* and *La hojarasca*; Caballero Calderón's *El Cristo de espaldas*, *Siervo sin tierra* and *Manuel Pacho*; Jorge Zalamea's allegorical and disturbing *El gran Burundún Burundá ha muerto*; and Manuel Mejía Vallejo's *El día señalado*.

It is indeed unfortunate that, except for those of García Márquez, even the best of these works are difficult to obtain in the United States. Many are out of print even in Colombia, and at least one (*Lo que el cielo no perdona*) fell into such disfavor with the government that it was banned. Written pseudonymously by a priest who was later withdrawn from service, the book has become all but impossible to find in Colombia.

Its major defect is its blatant partisanship which "virtually degenerates into a treatise in defense of the guerrilleros."¹⁴

What is true of novels is even more applicable to short stories; only a tiny number of these have been anthologized and thereby have some chance of recognition outside Colombia. One of the most interesting is Carlos Arturo Truque's moving and compassionate "Vivan los compaeros," which describes in understated and succinct terms a guerrilla band nearing its end. A young university student, called only "el estudiante," struggles to teach one of the illiterate guerrilleros to read and write. As he lies dying of his wounds, the luckless peasant scrawls "Vivan los compaeros" on a small slate. Despite its subject matter the story leaves the reader with a feeling of optimism, a sign that he has come in the short space of the story's narration to identify with "el estudiante."¹⁵

Almost without exception the novelists of *la Violencia* have been males, and therefore a recent novel on the theme written by a woman, *Mi capitán Fabián Sicachá* (Barcelona, 1968) by Flor Romero de Nohra is of special interest. This disappointing work proves once again that the best novels are written about what their creators know best, and it is painfully evident that Sra. Romero de Nohra knows little about what constitutes life in a guerrilla band. The novel itself skips back and forth between Sicachá, a rebel leader, and his wife, varying in setting from the rural areas where Sicachá operates; to the capital, where he serves a prison term; to Venezuela, where the reader is treated to scenes of the ex-guerrilla chieftain trying to sell appliances from door to door! Had the author contented herself with writing a novel depicting the torments of a brave woman whose husband daily risked his life fighting the established order while she remained protected but powerless far from the battle, this might have been a better book. As it is, it has little to recommend it and adds nothing to one's understanding of *la Violencia*.

Only the specialist will have the time to read the dozens of novels appearing each year which deal with the theme of *la Violencia* either directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, the three novels to be discussed in depth here perhaps represent the best of the genre and constitute an excellent point of departure for those wishing to sample the literary out-growth stemming from *la Violencia*. The three works are *El Cristo de espaldas*, by Eduardo Caballero Calderón; *La mala hora*, by Gabriel García Márquez; and *Usheda*, by Alvaro Valencia Tovar. The discussion, while recognizing the question of literary merit, focuses primarily on the novels as social documents - i.e., their usefulness for understanding politico-economic forces at work in Colombian society.

V

El Cristo de espaldas, first published in 1953 in Argentina, did not

appear in Colombia until 1961. The protagonist, a young priest known only as "el cura," is sent to a remote mountain town where his desire to lead his benighted parishioners toward God is thwarted by the evil which surrounds them. The reader is quickly introduced to the life of a village led by corrupt officials - they happen to be Conservatives, though notably that fact is secondary - and into a morass of conspiracy, greed and eventually murder.

Anacleto Piragua, son of the town's *gamonal* (political boss), now legally an adult, returns to the village after a three-year absence to claim his inheritance of land left him by his mother. His father, with whom the youth had quarreled bitterly before his departure, had planned to pass the holdings to his other son, an illegitimate off-spring whom he had always preferred over Anacleto. His business settled, the youth is about to leave the town when the body of his father is discovered, victim of a brutal stabbing. Anacleto, a Liberal, is accused by the town's authorities - Conservatives to a man - and only the intervention of the newly arrived priest prevents a lynching.

Opinion is unanimous in the town that Anacleto killed his father for political reasons: to aid the Liberal guerrilla band always rumored to be just beyond the next mountain peak and which keeps the village in perpetual apprehension. (Their only appearance in the novel takes place well outside the town and throughout they remain as faceless as ghosts.) The priest telegraphs the departmental governor requesting a special investigator to insure a fair trial for Anacleto, whom he manages to transfer to protective custody in the town below, where a few Liberals are still tolerated. While there he confers with his predecessor, a loquacious and boorish old priest whose sympathies plainly lie with the authorities and whose political philosophy begins and ends with "render unto Caesar."

The mystery of the killing is lessened suddenly with the confession of a dying man that he had carried out the murder on the order of others. But before he can tell the priest who commissioned the assassination he dies, leaving the puzzle as incomplete as before. In a final turn of the ironic screw, the priest receives a letter from his monsignor informing him that he is relieved of duty for "meddling" in local political affairs! In less than five days, the letter says, he has succeeded in alienating the mayor, the town council, the former parish priest, even the national directorate of the Conservative party and the governor of the department. He leaves with the innocent Anacleto's fate in the hands of his political enemies, the priest's own lips sealed forever by the sanctity of the confession. Casting a last look at his lost flock, he prays, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

This tale of a town on which "Christ turned His back" (and which itself had turned its back on Christ) is judged by some to be the foremost

novel of *la Violencia*. It is an expertly written chronicle of the agonies of a well meaning but rather ingenuous young priest seeking to apply Christian laws of charity in a land that recognizes only the law of the jungle. Character development rather than physical action is the hallmark of the novel. Like the others to be discussed, mood predominates, not description of bloodletting or recounting of atrocities. One critic points to the value of this novel as social document in the following phrases:

Through [the priest's] search for truth and justice, the reader obtains an historical perspective of *la Violencia*. The rebellion of the Liberals is not without justification. Their escape to the *llanos* is quite understandably an act of self-preservation. Their enemies are in control of the armed forces. Law and order are used as weapons of the wicked. ¹⁶

In fairness it should be observed that there is no suggestion in *El Cristo de espaldas* that conditions were any better for Conservatives living in towns dominated by Liberals. The priest's debacle is a transparent metaphor for the impotence of the Church before the spectre of *la Violencia*. The same motif occurs in *La mala hora*, where on the last page Father Angel (the innocence of angels!) states "I didn't realize anything." Both authors imply that *la Violencia* is more powerful than any other force in society, including even the paramount religious institution. Where God Himself abandons mankind (Christ turns His back), the Church becomes at best an irrelevancy.

Literary virtues aside, this novel is important for its depiction of certain central political forces affecting society. The Church, as we have implied, is seen as what might be termed a "partisan neutral," leaning toward the Conservatives but prepared to cooperate with the constituted government whatever its coloration. In no way it is presented as an even remotely renovative or revitalizing force but rather as a fundamental bulwark of the status quo. The novel also describes with a high degree of accuracy the persecution of opposition party adherents in small towns during *la Violencia*, and its portrait of cupidity and reckless ambition is firmly rooted in social reality. Finally, life in the distant reaches of the nation is drawn in terms of a world virtually unto itself, isolated from the far-off and indifferent capital - a theme present also in *Usheda*, as we shall see. Contacts from the outside, like the priest, are an annoyance at best, a threat at worst. His failure to realize this condemns the priest to be ejected like the demons Christ cast out from the swine. *El Cristo de espaldas* is a faithful rendering of life in a small town of the interior, differing from thousands like it only in the specific details which form the mundane mosaic of its drab existence.

García Márquez, in an article appearing in 1960, lamented the lack of a great novel on the theme of *la Violencia* and offered his explanation

of the phenomenon. On one hand, he contended, many novelists attempted the subject without first-hand experience with their topic, thus foredooming their efforts. (On this point even a sympathetic critic like Mario Vargas Llosa takes umbrage, noting that García Márquez himself has written fine fiction based on secondary accounts.) Even those authors who were eyewitnesses to *la Violencia*, however, did not produce outstanding literature because "they were in the presence of a great novel and lacked the serenity and patience...to take the time they needed to learn how to write it."¹⁷ This latter group "grabbed the radish by its leaves" - i.e., went about the task in the wrong manner. In their anxiety to describe "the decapitated, the castrated, the violated women, and the guts hanging out," they lost sight of the fact that "the novel was not in the dead... but in the living who must have sweated ice in their hiding places."¹⁸ Their task, García Márquez argued, lay in portraying not the violence itself but its consequences - the state of terror it engendered.

In *La mala hora* (authorized version, 1966) García Márquez puts into practice his precepts, producing a work of great power and significance. Although it is less than that great novel to which he alludes, with it he succeeds in evoking the sensation of numbing horror which engulfed the unfortunate inhabitants of the violence-ridden backlands.¹⁹

In a period of political calm between elections, the people of "el pueblo" (which may or may not be Macondo, the scene of García Márquez' most famous work) are shocked by the sudden appearance of anonymous pasquinades relating intimate details about the private lives of leading citizens. Although in the main they reveal little that is not already common gossip, their mere presence sows seeds of distrust and suspicion which, eventually, bloom into violence in the erstwhile somnolent town. Bit by bit the reader perceives that the coming of the pasquinades only underlines a condition of continual disquietude in the town, a heritage from the time when *la Violencia* was at its apogee. As one of the characters remarks, "You don't know what it is to get up every morning with the certainty that they're going to kill you, and for ten years to go by without them killing you."²⁰ It is this psychological horror that the anonymous leaflets rekindle, reducing the town over a seventeen day period to a hotbed of mutual recrimination and hatred. Ultimately they lead to murder - a man kills the purported lover of his wife after an unsigned denunciation - and to a virtual disintegration of the town's societal fiber.

To what purpose is the disorder? The obvious beneficiaries are those elements that adhere to neither side in the political settlement, which sought an end to the previous violence: the revolutionaries who accept neither party. Written at a time when the National Front agreement had brought about a sharp diminution of armed conflict, *La mala hora* reveals the tenuousness of any such understandings, especially those undertaken at the national level, in a rural culture where hatreds and

suspicious are passed on from generation to generation. As Vargas Llosa puts it:

By its magnitude the violence has bored deeply into that society, it is in the air which the people breathe, it already constitutes an essential trait of the "pueblo." the story itself is situated in a brief parenthesis (one to two years) between the horror already experienced and the horror to come.²¹

If indeed the goal of the unknown distributors of the pasquinades is to further undermine confidence in a government already riddled with corruption and marked by hypocrisy and venality, it is largely achieved; in the final lines of the novel a character comments that arms have been discovered in the home of the hairdresser, the jail is full, and men are fleeing to join the guerrillas. The "evil hour" to which the title refers has struck again.

Like most other works considered here, *La mala hora* sides with neither Liberals nor Conservatives. Gracia Márquez, himself a socialist, obviously sees the problems of "el pueblo" as having roots deeper than the mere differences in nomenclature which he believes distinguish the two parties. "Not being a political instrument," as Kirsner states, "the novel does not suggest that the town would have enjoyed a more peaceful fate...in the hands of the opposite party. On the contrary, if the action implies any didactic judgment, it is that civil strife is inevitable."²²

The theme of the debilitating effects on the body politic of corruption, avarice and aggression, exacerbated by the shortsightedness of the parties, occurs in other works by the same author, among them *Cien años de soledad*. In his short story "Un día de éstos" two of the characters in *La mala hora*, the dentist and the mayor, are involved in a conflict of wills. The dentist finally agrees to extract the official's aching molar and does so without anesthesia. The rotting tooth is an unmistakable allusion to the putrescent political organism of "el pueblo". The mayor's excruciating pain "is that of Macondo. It is a pain which contaminates everyone, even the traveler passing through the town."²³

Nowhere does García Márquez censure any single contributor for the troubles besetting his people. No one political party is at fault, but neither is blameless. The rich and powerful, while characterized by unconcern for all but their own pleasure and status, could not long prosper in a society that did not conspire in their ascendancy. Given the injustices which dominate the world in his books, García Márquez appears to accept violence as inevitable. He never advocates violence, but rather views it as an inescapable aspect of life in an unjust society, much as does Ariel Dorfman. Without describing in detail the atrocities which gave *la Violencia* its name, García Márquez creates an atmosphere in which an amorphous sense of dread pervades each page. Like Camus'

The Plague, which he used as a model, *La mala hora* focuses on the anguish of the living rather than the suffering of the dead. Though he never uses the word "oligarchy," never cites by name either political party, and never says "Colombia," his novel is simultaneously both universal and specific. The reader perceives counter-points time and again with Colombian and Latin American reality, and no one acquainted with the political system of García Márquez' country can fail to ask how such conditions came into being and why they continue to exist. Thus does a "non-political" novel raise a provocative and profound political question.

Fourteen years have passed since García Márquez wrote that *la Violencia* had not brought forth a great novel. It is still true that a truly great novel about that subject has yet to be published. But, from the viewpoint of literature as a vehicle for appreciation of a national ethos, no novel of *la Violencia* is more important than *Usheda*, published in 1969 and written by a career military officer, General Alvaro Valencia Tovar. An unevenness and tendency to be episodic reflect the non-literary background of its author, but the novel is a moving and vigorous social document which captures a feeling of the vastness of Colombia's eastern *Llano* and of the men and women who inhabit it. Based on Valencia Tovar's own field experiences during *la Violencia*, *Usheda* is a vital, sprawling work which borders on the epic as it recounts the history of the region from the late nineteenth century through the period of *la Violencia*.

The word *usheda* is a recurring neologism of the author. One of Valencia Tovar's characters explains its meaning:

Usheda is an indigenous word, don Ismael. It means many things at once. The Indians use it to speak of a wasted effort, of a village burned by lightning, or of the crazy things they themselves do, without reason or benefit. For them, *usheda*...is the plague that falls upon their settlements from time to time and annihilates the tribes who flee in terror, burning their huts and abandoning everything that the wrath of their vengeful gods may touch. *Usheda* is also the war that breaks out between tribes, the child that dies when it is born, and even the house where they bury their dead so they can sleep their final sleep underneath a roof....Perhaps what *usheda* is best used for is to indicate the absurdity that often exists in the acts of men.²⁴

The word conveys other shades of meaning. Asked why it also signifies the plains (*llanura*) that begin where the cattle ranches end, the speaker replies:

Perhaps because it's an enormous amount of land, wasted, of no use to anyone....Here you can ride hundreds of leagues without meeting a soul or a domesticated animal or a shack where you can thank God for this beautiful and pure land just

waiting for someone to put his hand on her so she can give herself like a naked virgin...this is *Usheda* exactly... the absurdly stupid absurdity of things!²⁵

The novel alternates between two narrative threads, beginning with the tale of the Hattar family and leaping forward perhaps thirty years to introduce José Antônio Robles, commander of a military pacification force in the Llano. The meeting of Robles and Joselino Hattar provides the framework for the powerful and utterly believable conclusion, in a land torn by the rancor and fears of *la Violencia*. A veritable horde of minor characters appears also, but it is the Hattars - father and sons - and Robles who dominate the work.

Usheda opens with Ismael Hattar, a young peddler from the Middle East, in a back woods town where he witnesses a cockfight (a quintessential symbol of violence in Latin American fiction). Within a short time he has won the respect of don Julio, owner of the hacienda El Araguaney, through his intelligence, physical strength and hard work. His marriage to don Julio's daughter marks the beginning of a dynasty capable of subduing the boundless, inhospitable lands of the Llano.

Two sons are born of the union: Efraim, a strong, rowdy, hedonistic replica of his father, and Joselino, more sensitive, deliberate and cerebral than his brother. The elder Hattar's open preference for his first born lends an undertone of rivalry which runs throughout the first section of the novel.²⁶ As the boys grow to adolescence their father leaves to make his fortune from rubber trees in the jungle during the *caucho* boom, vowing to come home a rich man. Seven years later he returns, broken and betrayed, to discover his "weakling" son Joselino has become a strong, determined, self-reliant man who, along among his family, has remained on El Araguaney and has even managed to enlarge the family's holdings.

Reunited, the family sets out to settle the virtually deserted land between the Llano and the jungle, where the only inhabitants are warring tribes of Indians. In the trek both Efraim and his father are killed, but Joselino survives to make peace with the natives by dint of his constant effort to understand their ways. His marriage with a young Cuparro Indian woman seals the bond of friendship between white and Indian and makes possible the founding of a city in the wilderness, Puerto Iliana.

Decades later, Commander Robles, chief of a pacification troop parachuting into the violence-torn area of Puerto Iliana, finds the town deserted. Fearing mass slaughter at the approach of the army, the inhabitants have fled. Robles, an extremely perceptive and humane officer whose will is as unbending as the oak whose name he bears, gives a standing order that no soldier is to fire his weapon unless attacked, despite the soldier's desire to wipe out the *chusma* (scum) who have rebelled against the government. Robles also forbids the use of the word

chusma and sets his men sifting through the rubble of the large house which had belonged to one Joselino Hattar. From letters, photos and documents Robles quickly gains an insight into Puerto Lliana and its people.

Encounters with refugees bolster Roble's impression that the region's inhabitants have rebelled out of desperation:

It's important to remember [Robles says] that in these far off reaches the State is a non-existent entity, which has ignored these territories and from which the people who live here have received nothing....They have lived and died here without a doctor to attend to them, without a nurse to help mothers through the pains of childbirth, or a teacher to educate those who don't die. If a man is not a rebel in circumstances like these it's because he doesn't have the guts to be one....Certain ringleaders capitalize on this exasperating situation [and] feed the revolt in the souls of people who have been incubating it in silence. They make them see their misery, the neglect in which they find themselves, the immense tragedy of their horizonless lives.²⁷

Knowing that a guerrilla band can be rooted out only when it loses its popular support, Robles undertakes a patient and carefully concerted plan to extirpate the conditions that led to revolt and to gain the confidence of the people, granting all who wish to return to their farms the right to do so without interference, even if they are known rebels. His approach is summed up in a discussion with his subalterns:

Let's start from a basic point [Robles says]. For one hundred percent of the population of the Lower Llano, the revolution is just. At this moment the guerrillas are the assault force of their aspirations, their abandonment and their exasperation. They constitute their army, while we are their enemy. No one can defeat a people who struggle convinced of the justice of their cause. You can eliminate them, you can perhaps destroy them, if you have overwhelming force, but you can never subdue them.²⁸

In the jungle Robles seeks out Joselino Hattar, who refuses to ally himself with the army just as he has refrained from joining the rebels. In subsequent meetings bonds of sympathy grow between the two, fostered by a common interest in literature and philosophy. Joselino is withdrawn and disillusioned by the destruction of the city he founded and governed for many years. Nevertheless, he agrees to arrange a meeting between Robles and one of the rebel chieftains, a former soldier who years earlier had served under Robles before being driven into revolt by an unjust murder charge and subsequent mistreatment at the hands of the

notorious rural Guard. Roble's sincerity and candor begin to undermine the guerrilla fighters' cohesion, and many of them grow impatient to engage the army in battle - an impossibility because of the commander's care to avoid confrontations.

Within a few months, despite an ambush by the guerrilla band and his almost being relieved of command because of political pressure from the capital, Roble accomplishes his goal: the popular base of the rebels crumbles and he is able to prove that certain of the guerrilla leaders had been using their followers as dupes for their ideological ends. Deserted by the people, broken in morale, and bereft of materials and men, the irregulars are scattered and rounded up; peace returns to the region. Roble announces his hope of founding a new city, Mapanare, with the help of the army, to unite the Lower Llano and the jungle just as the union of Joséfino and his Indian wife had joined the blood and destiny of two peoples.

Even a lengthy résumé can only touch upon the magnitude of the themes incorporated in *Uisheda*, which at times approaches the force and impact of a famous novel by another Colombian, *La vorágine* by José Eustacio Rivera. The commander's empathy with even those who rise up in arms against the government he has taken an oath to defend, the author's compassion for the downtrodden and his skillful and unobtrusive introduction of tactical and strategic considerations into the novel - all enhance the total effect. Like García Márquez, Valencia Tovar refrains from graphic descriptions of savagery, for reasons he explains in a foreword:

Uisheda, in focusing upon the phenomenon [of *la violencia*], deliberately shuns the sickening expression of the act of violence, manifesting itself in atrocious crimes... or monstrous deformations of pathological character. It does not seek out splashes of blood, nor horrifying descriptions of mutilations, arson, genocide, sexuality and depravity. There is enough of all that in the daily relating of new happenings. It tries, rather, to look at mental and sociological circumstances....²⁹

Written with advantages of both time and circumstance (it is the latest to appear of the three books examined here, and Valencia Tovar possesses actual military experience in combatting *la Violencia*), *Uisheda* is a telling social document which at the same time stands on its own literary merits. Produced in the calm of reflection rather than in the heat of battle, it thereby gains a panoramic view of Colombia's troubled past and successfully relates the events of *la Violencia* to the historical context in which it arose. Realistic yet optimistic, it is also an impassioned plea for a government which will view *all* Colombians as part of the nation, even those in the farthest corners of the *uisheda*.³⁰

IV

What utility do the novels of *la Violencia* have as a tool for better understanding of Colombian society? First, it must be stressed that authors like García Márquez and his contemporaries are men of letters, not economists, sociologists, historians or political scientists. They write with the intention of creating a work of *artistic verity* rather than to espouse social ideologies or educate readers about their country's politico-economic infrastructure. Whatever their usefulness to social scientists, these works are not didactic novels. The writers cited here avoid any attempt to openly propagandize their audience. This is true even of the socialist García Márquez, of whom it has been said:

In the works of fiction...where the historical demon of "*la Violencia*" is the principal source, the...social and political theme, although essential..., is curiously removed from the foreground of the action, appearing in an oblique manner: it is the remote and minute consequences of "*la violencia*" which seem to constitute the material of the story, while the primordial causes are alluded to with timidity and at times suppressed.³¹

The same judgment holds true for the majority of other authors who have written other than party tracts about *la Violencia*. They are explicitly less concerned with the root causes of the phenomenon than with its effects. Like García Márquez, both Caballero Calderón and Valencia Tovar outwardly ignore the question of what caused *la Violencia*. Just as social scientists disagree about the genesis of *la Violencia* and about the societal forces which contributed to its duration and ferocity, some authors do divide into various schools of thought, like León Herrera in *Lo que el cielo no perdona*, who blames conservative government which came to power in 1946. But most authors skirt the issue or avoid it altogether, evidently feeling that it is irrelevant to the more important human questions which they wish to explore. With the exception of a few lesser works of partisan stripe (e.g., *Viento seco*), the writers realize that calling a partisan polemic fiction does not make it literature. The best writers, in short, are pro-humanity, not pro-party.

Few intimations are found in the works of leading authors that *la Violencia* would have been less intense had a given community been ruled by the opposing party, or that Conservatives engaged in killing with an enthusiasm not shared by their Liberal counterparts.

It follows, then, that commentary on Colombian society will perforce appear in indirect fashion in the novels. Sermonizing is left to the priest who abound in these works set almost invariably in the countryside where the violence occurred. Some, like Valencia Tovar, criticize the government's lack of concern, but again not in partisan terms. A Liberal government or a Conservative administration, one feels, turns the same

blind eye to the problems of a forgotten people.

The Church: In general this institution is presented as an irrelevant force in combatting *la Violencia*. Rather than openly attack the Church as archaic and reactionary, most writers choose simply to deny the possibility of its playing a meaningful role in the conflict.

The National Front: In the novels written after 1958 this political arrangement is virtually unmentioned, a reflection of the fact that most of the books are set in the pre-Front period, most commonly 1948-53 and 1954-58.

The oligarchy: The social scientist accustomed to endless argument about the role of oligarchs in Latin America will no doubt be surprised by the infrequency which with the term arises in this genre. One reason may be that the city-centered lives of the oligarchy are far removed, spatially and economically, from those of the inhabitants of the dreary hamlets portrayed in the novels. In *Usheda* it is the guerrilla ideologues (a small but vociferous group) who use the term, which then is parroted back by the "useful idiots" without understanding: "The oligarchs - I wonder what the hell oligarchs are, dammit! - sucked the blood of the people. There could be only one clear remedy: the revolution of the proletariat."³² With a wink at the reader the author satirizes the uncomprehending use of a word which has become so common in Colombia as to lose any real meaning. It was Jorge Gaitán who popularized the term, and there is a possibility that its frequent use as a Liberal catchword has led the writers to avoid it lest they unwittingly compromise their artistic position above the fray by employing terminology identified in the public consciousness with one party or faction. Their view, after all, emphasizes the universal aspects of suffering, the oneness of all humanity faced with the threat of sudden and senseless death, and to bandy about the term "oligarchy" might diminish this purpose.

Finally, the usefulness of literature to social science cannot be denied, but its inherent limitations also must be recognized and compensated for. The writers create an artistic universe for their own purposes, not to teach others about socioeconomic systems and political parties. They assume some understanding and background on the part of their readers - i.e., they share a common frame of reference so that much can be left unsaid or can be read between the lines. For this reason only a reader possessing some acquaintance with the history, politics and socioeconomic milieu which form the novel's setting can derive the maximum benefit from the literature of *la Violencia*. Even the uninitiated, however, will find much of worth in this rich and apparently inexhaustible genre.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 DORFMAN, Ariel. "La violencia en la novela hispanoamericana actual," in *Imaginación y violencia en América*. Santiago, Chile, 1970, p. 11.
- 2 FROMM, Erich. *The Sane Society*. Greenwich, Conn., 1955, pp. 41-42.
- 3 DORFMAN, "La Violencia...," Chapter I. We recommend the entire work to those interested in the role of violence in contemporary Hispanic American literature.
- 4 Paper delivered at 19th annual meeting of Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies, San Diego, California, September 28, 1973. p. 4.
- 5 Thus Caballero Calderón can include with complete verisimilitude the following passage in *El Cristo de Espaldas*:
 "Speaking of that, friend, are there still any liberals in Agua Bonita?"
 "Three or four...survivors, as don Roque says, because the others went up to Llano Redondo, with the bandits." (p. 45).
 Later in the same novel an exchange between two Conservatives demonstrates the extremes to which partisan sentiments carried the more fanatic party members:
 "Thank God that [because it was a work day there weren't any scum [chusma] in church!"
 "There weren't any scum, godson...there weren't. But [they] saw Maira Encarna whining behind a column with one of her little girls....She was wearing a red ribbon - yessir, red! - on her head. And they both took communion." "Really?" said the mayor. "That's a provocation, friend!" (pp. 48-49)
- 6 For a time during the last years of the National Front it appeared that ANAPO (National Popular Alliance), which began as a personalist party of ex-dictador Gustavo Rojas Pinilla but evolved into at least a semblance of populism, might alter the two-party configuration. But ANAPO reached its apogee in the 1970 presidential elections - which some observers believe it won - and the discontinuance of the Front will probably reduce ANAPO's appeal as an outlet for protest against both parties.
- 7 CAMPOS, German Guzmán; BORDA, Orlando Fals; and LIMA, Eduardo Umaña. *La violencia en Colombia*, two volumes Bogotá, 1963-64, is an indispensable source for study of *la Violencia*.
- 8 Russell Ramsey, for example, divides *la Violencia* into four phases, the last ending in 1965. For full documentation, see note 13.
- 9 BAILEY, Norman A. "La Violencia in Colombia," *Journal of*

Interamerican Studies, IX (1967), p. 561. The departments swept by the second wave were Caldas, Valle, Antioquia, Cundinamarca, Tolima, Huila and Cauca.

- 10 One of the most complete examinations of possible causes of *la Violencia* can be found in Chapter 13, "La Violencia," of Robert H. Dix's study *Colombia: The Political Dimensions of Change* (New Haven, 1967). Dix argues that the root cause of *la Violencia* was "the superimposition of Colombia's crisis of modernization on the patterns of the country's hereditary hatreds."
- 11 BAILEY, "La Violencia...", p. 574.
- 12 In fact an entire new vocabulary arose as a result of *la Violencia*. Publio González-Rodas lists several pages of neologisms stemming from the bloodshed, including such items as "bocachiquear," which means to cut the body in various places so the victim slowly bleeds to death. See "Léxico de la Violencia en Colombia," *Hispania*, LI (May, 1968), pp. 302-9.
- 13 This list was compiled from a variety of sources, including José A. Núñez Segura, *Literatura colombiana* (Medellin, 1967); Alberto Zuluaga Ospina, "Notas sobre la novelística de la violencia en Colombia," *Cuadernos Hispóamericanos*, CCXI (December, 1967, pp. 597-608; and Russel W. Ramsey, "Critical Bibliography of La Violencia in Colombia," *Latin American Research Review*, VIII (Spring, 1973), p. 3-44. This last named is an unsurpassed bibliographical source for information on all aspects of *la Violencia*, not merely the literary. It includes some 250 references, all annotated.
- 14 For a discussion, see KIRSNER, Robert. "Four Colombian Novels of 'La Violencia,'" *Hispania*, IL (March, 1966), pp. 70-74, from which the above citation is taken.
- 15 Both this story and "Sangre en los jazmines," by the well known *cuentista* Hernando Téllez, can be found in *Nuevos narradores colombianos* (Caracas, 1968). The Téllez, contribution deals with rural vengeance in the setting of *la Violencia* but is not the literary equal of the other story.
- 16 KIRSNER, "Four Colombian Novels...." p. 71.
- 17 Quoted in VARGAS LLOSA, Mário. García Márquez: *Historia de un delicidio* Barcelona, 1971, p. 133.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 134
- 19 This discussion of *La mala hora* owes much to Vasda Bonafini Landers, "Macondo y *la Violencia* en la obra de Gabriel García Márquez," M.A. thesis, Sam Houston State University, 1972, especially Chapter IV.

- 20 La mala hora, p. 169.
- 21 VARGAS LLOSA, García Márquez:..., p. 435.
- 22 KIRSNER, "Four Colombian Novels...." p. 72.
- 23 HARSS, Luis. "Gabriel García Márquez o la cuerda floja," *Mundo Nuevo*, No. 6 (December, 1966), p. 73.
- 24 Uisheda, pp. 50-51.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 26 Valencia demonstrates his technical skill avoiding the cliché-ridden Cain-Abel situation; although the brothers quarrel and engage in a bitter rivalry over a girl, they never arrive at a definitive split. Similarly, another pitfall is bypassed when in the last part of the novel the major antagonist is dispatched not by Robles but by a minor character making his second appearance in the 479-page book. Finally, the author overcomes any temptation toward a facile body-mind dichotomy type of symbolism in the two Hattar brothers by allowing Joselino to evolve into a forceful and dynamic individual who combines both mind and body in a single compassionate person.
- 27 Uisheda, pp. 192-93.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 30 The social scientist may ask what role Valencia, a professional soldier, sees the military as playing in that better future which he looks to. In *Latinamericanist*, VII, No. 5 (June 2, 1972) General Valencia is quoted as saying "the army's place is to aid development"; it is not designed (or willing) to govern the nation. His writings have repeatedly stressed the civic action role of the military. (See "Lesson of *la Violencia*: the problem is not military," pp. 6-7.)
- 31 VARGAS LLOSA, García Márquez:..., pp. 131-32.
- 32 Uisheda, pp. 292-93.