

# Knowledge and Time in García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

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In Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the unnamed narrator sets out in a pursuit to compile the remaining pieces of truth surrounding the murder of Santiago Nasar, twenty-seven years after the event. As the narrator recounts a series of facts relating to Santiago's death, however, the reader becomes aware of the futility of this effort, as the collection of past information cannot encompass or recreate the experience itself. Evaluating both the narrator's desire to revisit the past and the foretold events leading up to Santiago's death, the narrative explores the ways in which the past and the future impose upon present existence and assign meaning to the individual's experience. In addition, as the narrator uses the form of a chronicle to organize time into a confined segment, he engages in an historical inquiry of both the murder of Santiago and the nature of time itself. Through the chronicle's limited ability to account for the impositions of past and future, time emerges as an entity that resists and calls into question this linear segmentation constructed by human beings. However, where some critics might interpret this imposition of the past and future to be an indication of predetermination, García Márquez's *Chronicle* maintains the notion of personal agency through its depiction of Angela's letter-writing, which affirms the authority of the present and reassigns meaning to the past and future in the same non-linear fashion.

Fascinated by a murder that occurred in his town nearly three decades previous, the narrator continues to pursue the truth surrounding Santiago's death out of the desire to reconstruct and secure the past. While his primary motivation for this pursuit seems to be a curiosity over the town's awareness of the approaching murder, the narrator also suggests that he finds in the event a reflection of his own experience: "I returned to this forgotten village, trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many scattered shards."<sup>1</sup> Attempting to compose an account based on the fragmented and contradictory memories of his neighbors, it is no surprise that the narrator would refer to memory as "broken" and "shattered." The choice of the word "mirror," however, raises a puzzling question as to the way in which memory also reflects the one who peers into the past. Thus, as the narrator pieces together the subjective recollections of the townspeople, his written chronicle also indicates his own glance into the mirror, reflecting his fascination with Santiago's death and the impact of time upon knowledge. Furthermore, "[the narrator] does in fact recognize that the 'shards of memory' with which he works are dangerously slippery, and that the backward movement of the mind through time is far less certain than the forward movement of clock and calendar toward the foretold death he wishes to chronicle."<sup>2</sup> As his linear experience of the present continues to move him farther away from the event that he seeks to chronicle, the narrator discovers a conflict between the movement of time and human recollection. As his own memory proves fallible, the narrator becomes fixated upon the death of Santiago, attempting to secure a segment of the past from the alterations that time may make: "I had a very confused

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, (New York: Vintage International, 1982), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Lois P. Zamora, "Ends and Beginnings in García Márquez's *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada*," *Latin American Literary Review* 13, no. 25 (1985): 109, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20119390>.

memory of the festival before I decided to rescue it piece by piece from the memory of others.”<sup>3</sup>

Seeking to “rescue” the knowledge that is slipping away from him, the narrator acknowledges the way in which the passage of time alters the meaning of an event by imposing the limitation of a linear consciousness upon the present experience.

Yet, despite this attempt to “rescue” the memory of the event, the inherently historical approach to the study of Santiago’s death alters the object itself, as the values of this discipline codify the narrator’s approach. Defining the method by which history reassigns meaning to the object of study, historian and theorist Hayden White states,

The very claim to have distinguished a past from a present world of social thought and praxis, and to have determined the formal coherence of that past world, *implies* a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is *continuous* with that past world. Commitment to a particular *form* of knowledge predetermines the *kinds* of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, as the narrator discerns knowledge and forges generalizations, history emerges less as an objective practice that exists in the same vein as truth and more as a practice that reflects human projects, biases, and questions. Because the historical method of investigation alters the object of study, which in this case is Santiago’s death, the practice of history reveals itself to be more structurally rigid than the memories it attempts to chronicle. Within the “kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive,” the historical approach also presupposes a level of authorial objectivity, shown through the impersonal and journalistic persona assumed by the narrator even when relating events in which he was involved: “the narrator carefully disavows

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 21.

omniscience; he seems to hope that by refusing to acknowledge to himself or his readers his role as *creator* of a written verbal order, he can force events to speak for themselves, to yield their own objective truth."<sup>5</sup> Revisiting his past with the intentional exclusion of his own participation in it, the narrator endeavors to distance himself from his written record, favoring the values of the historical method over the authenticity of his own experience. The novel thus conveys a conflict between the impartiality valued by a subjective discipline and the partiality of human memory in relation to an objective event. However, despite the limitations and biases that the historical method imposes upon the object of study, the narrator would be unable to organize or collect factual information surrounding Santiago's murder without a kind of disciplinary structure. Thus, the novel suggests that while the historical approach can compile facts, the objective truth of a given occurrence evades disciplinary knowledge, as truth, like time, exists independent of the forms constructed by individuals.

As an historical pursuit of the murder also raises questions pertaining to the nature of time, the narrator's choice in using the form of a chronicle becomes significant, as this form attempts to segment time in order to study Santiago's death from a linear approach. Concerned with determining the causes and predictors of the murder, the narrator uses the chronicle form to assign a sense of order and chronology to the event:

the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a 'spectacle' or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Lois P. Zamora, "Ends and Endings in García Márquez's *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada*," 108.

<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory*, 5.

Placing value upon the “temporal order of their occurrence,” the narrator approaches the span of time in which the murder took place with a linear perception, believing that a chronological reordering of the events will reproduce the experience. However, as indicated by the leaps in the narrative that propel the reader forward to events following the death and backward into the familial history of the characters involved, the narrator realizes that the experience itself cannot be accurately retold in the same linear fashion in which it seemed to occur. Thus, although the narrator assigns a beginning to his chronicle, this placement reflects an arbitrary decision to segment time: “In principle they have no *inaugurations*; they simply ‘begin’ when the chronicler starts recording events.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, as suggested in the form of chronicle, the narrator’s approach to studying the murder endeavors to separate and organize time into a series of increments. However, the chronicle form also indicates that these increments possess at best a subjective sense of finitude, as the “open-ended” nature of the chronicle presents events as being a piece within a larger context of periodic time.<sup>8</sup> Even though Santiago’s life has come to an end, the chronicle form accurately alludes to the fact that the occurrence of his murder continues to posthumously impact the progression of time. Thus, although the chronicle relies on a linear ordering of time, which itself emerges as a non-linear, continuously shifting entity, the narrator approaches the object of study through this open-ended form in order to categorize the factual knowledge surrounding the murder and acknowledge its placement within the progression of these perceived segments. Far from segmenting time into a solitary piece, however, the narrator’s use of a chronicle actually reconceptualizes the idea of time as

<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

surrounding and imposing upon the present in a spherical fashion, despite its perceived notion of linearity.

Thus, the practice of history in this context moves beyond the study of an historical object onto an exploration of the nature of time itself. Although the chronicle must “possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end,” the end of Santiago’s life emerges from the account as being vaster than the moment of his actual death.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing the way in which the end of Santiago’s chronicle seems to occur within the beginning and middle of the narrative, the narrator states, “There had never been a death more foretold.”<sup>10</sup> In this statement, the narrator acknowledges the fact that Santiago’s “beginning” and “ending” are not as linearly distinguishable as originally thought. While Santiago remains alive until his collapse in the kitchen, the precise beginning of his murder is less exact, as the narrative describes events such as the Vicario twins’ plotting, Bayardo’s wedding, Angela’s deflowering, and even Ibrahim Nasar’s immigration to the town, all of which impact the course of events leading up to his physical death. Thus, as the chronicle itself attempts to segment the past into a linear account, time emerges as being more spherical and interconnected than the bounds of a chronological structure: “the individual’s relation to the beginning and the end of time becomes more difficult to imagine as the former recedes and the latter fails to present itself.”<sup>11</sup> Although the narrator intends to chronicle the specific object of Santiago’s death, the method that he must employ to organize this factual information raises questions more about the nature of time in relation to human knowledge than of the event itself. Throughout the novel, the narrator provides the

<sup>9</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Lois P. Zamora, “Ends and Endings in García Márquez’s *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada*,” 104.

names of the victim and perpetrators, the motive for the crime, the time and location of the murder, and the method of execution, all with a suspense-less factuality. However, even with this factual knowledge, the narrative suggests that something is unknowable within the passage of time, leaving the reader with a question of truth in spite of the given answers: "The chronicle seal frames the individual and underlines that he lives in a shared human system. Characters are dispersed in a town that has only one common certainty: time, and even this will soon fade in the memory of the interviewed eyewitnesses."<sup>12</sup> Thus, as the narrator recounts facts about the murder, the insufficiency of chronological knowledge raises questions as to the effect of time upon truth, making the method of inquiry as much a focus of the narrative as Santiago's death.

Within this chronicle, death becomes the intersection between the object of study and the method of approach, as the murder of Santiago determines both the significance of the event and the nature of time surrounding its occurrence. Significant, however, is the underlying fact that death is a known and inevitable end to human existence: "García Márquez exploits the most basic fact of human existence: the individual's end is by definition foretold, we all must die."<sup>13</sup> In this way, death becomes the intersection between a study of one's experience and of the nature of time, not only for Santiago but for all individuals. However, as Santiago's murder seems to have been preventable due to the publicity of its approach, the novel then raises questions about the impact of individual action in delaying or facilitating this common ending. In a seemingly deterministic moment, the Vicario twins note, "'There is no way out of this,'

<sup>12</sup> Randolph D. Pope, "Transparency and Illusion in García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*," *Latin American Literary Review* 15, no. 29 (1987): 185, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20119453>.

<sup>13</sup> Lois P. Zamora, "Ends and Endings in García Márquez's *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada*," 106.

[Pablo] told [Pedro]. 'It's as if it had already happened.'" <sup>14</sup> While this statement seems to paradoxically suggest finality to an event that has not yet occurred, the reality that there is "no way out" of death seems, to a certain degree, to have already established Santiago's end. Although the murder interjects this ending sooner than was anticipated, the fact remains that death as Santiago's end has "already" been foretold from the beginning. However, as Santiago's death disrupts the expected course, the narrator and townspeople recognize the way in which this death assigns meaning to the previously invisible instances of foretelling, which reveal the way in which present existence coincides with that of the future: "Not only the narrator but also the entire town wants to use Santiago's death to foretell their own."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as the narrator and townspeople remain bound in their present state and cannot yet assign meaning to the instances in their lives, they look instead to Santiago's death as a way to examine the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future that may also foretell their own end.

In addition to the fact that the narrator's fascination with writing the chronicle indicates the reemergence of the past into his present state, the events following Santiago's murder reveal the past as an entity capable of transcending its perceived linear structure. For example, immediately after the murder has entered the past, the narrator notes, "Everything continued smelling of Santiago Nasar that day."<sup>16</sup> As the memory of Santiago inserts itself into the present after his life has ended, the narrator suggests that the past is continually imposing itself onto the course of the present. Thus, the conventional notion of time as a linear entity cannot adequately account for the way in which these events are superimposed upon or connected to one another.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Lois P. Zamora, "Ends and Endings in García Márquez's *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada*," 109.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 78.



In addition, even after the murder has long been assigned as an event of the past, it continues to order and assign meaning to the events of the present:

For years we couldn't talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to spin around a single common anxiety. The cocks of dawn would catch us trying to give order to the chain of many chance events that had made absurdity possible, and it was obvious that we weren't doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of us could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to us by fate.<sup>17</sup>

Specifically noting the way in which the "linear habits" of the townspeople conflict with a "spinning" passage of time, the narrator muses over the possibility that although individuals are limited in a linear experience of the present, time itself functions in a more spherical and integrated fashion. As Santiago's death has assigned a deeper significance to the minute occurrences of that day, the narrator and townspeople become preoccupied with the way in which the seemingly common instances of their past and present may actually foretell their own ending: "Why [events] occurred as they did is to be explained by the revelation of the specific relationships they bore to other events occurring in their circumambient historical space."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the past murder continually imposes itself upon the present state of the townspeople, reassigning significance to its own occurrence and altering the way that the townspeople perceive the meaning of their own experience.

Furthermore, the narrative recognizes the foretold nature of the murder, suggesting that the future also emerges as being in constant contact with the present, reshaping its course through unnoticed interruptions. Although objective in its actual occurrence, Santiago's death remains an aspect of the future that cannot be precisely known or interpreted by the present.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory*, 18.

However, after Santiago's death, his mother realizes that persistent omens foretold of the event days before it happened: "[Plácida] hadn't noticed any ominous augury in those two dreams of her son's, or in the other dreams of trees he'd described to her on the mornings preceding his death. Nor did Santiago Nasar recognize the omen."<sup>19</sup> Although the future had been imposing upon Santiago's present state through dreams, neither Santiago nor his mother is able to transcend their own linear preoccupations to recognize this imposition. Yet, even though Santiago fails to interpret the omens that foretell his death, the future nevertheless continues to assert itself upon the present, ordering the course of events: "The present is visited in prophetic dreams by the future, but the future is in disguise. The complexity of the language of premonition lies in the fact that if the dream is a warning of something that may be avoided, and if it is avoided, then it will prove to be false."<sup>20</sup> In this way, Santiago's death assigns meaning to these interjections from the future, as the omens of his dreams must result in an absolute and inevitable future if the present is to be impacted by them. However, because Santiago and the townspeople are subject to a linear experience of time, the omens in his dreams go unnoticed until it is too late for their interpretation to alter the course of events, functioning only to reveal the idea that the future imposes upon and directs the present.

Similar to the prophetic and overlooked dreams that intrude upon Santiago's state, an anonymous letter that warns of his impending murder also indicates the unrecognized presence of the future in everyday experience. While Santiago's ominous dreams were envisioned but not interpreted, the significance of the note lies in the fact that it would only need to be read in order to be understood, but is still overlooked in the preoccupied present state:

<sup>19</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Randolph D. Pope, "Transparency and Illusion in García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*," 188.

Someone who was never identified had shoved an envelope under the door with a piece of paper warning Santiago Nasar that they were waiting for him to kill him, and, in addition, the note revealed the place, the motive, and other quite precise details of the plot. The message was on the floor when Santiago Nasar left home, but he didn't see it.

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Although the note was both visible and accessible to Santiago, the futuristic warning of the murder is not revealed until after the event has become the past. As the meaning of the note depends upon whether or not it is read, the mere presence of the information in Santiago's house cannot prevent or impact his impending death. In this same way, the note suggests that although the future exists continuously within the present, the individual will not be able to know or recognize its presence to be able to alter its course: "Like the note, all the 'texts' in the narrative [...] are first misread or unread; they are, as it were, temporarily invisible, but they eventually radiate a lucid visibility."<sup>22</sup> Just as the haunting memories of the townspeople revealed an imposition of the past onto the present, so too does Santiago's fate emerge as being directed by the imposition of the future, suggesting that time transcends the bounds created by linear consciousness.

Due to the sense that this foretold future and retold past direct the course of action in the novel, some critics have concluded that the narrative exemplifies the philosophy of predetermination, as Santiago seems powerless to control his fate. However, despite this surface reading, the narrative resists reinforcing the idea of predestination, as the characters have the potential to become agents of their own fate, seen in Angela's actions following the death of Santiago. Realizing her love for Bayardo after their disastrous wedding night, Angela Vicario

<sup>21</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Jorge Olivares, "García Márquez's *Cronica de una Muerte Anunciada* as Metafiction," *Contemporary Literature* 28, no. 4 (1987): 486, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208312>.

writes letters to him obsessively, despite his lack of response: "She became lucid, overbearing, mistress of her own free will, and she became a virgin again just for him, and she recognized no other authority than her own nor any other service than that of her obsession."<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the sense of past that colonizes the townspeople's psyche and the sense of future that orders Santiago's fate, Angela uses the act of letter-writing to reassert a sense of authority, reclaiming the capacity of her free will. Through the act of writing, Angela imposes her present state backwards onto her past, as she rewrites her virginity, and forward onto her future, as she disregards the potential outcome of the letters. Also, although Bayardo does return to her, the text muses over the fact he carries with him "almost two thousand letters that she had written him. They were arranged by date in bundles tied with colored ribbons, and they were all unopened."<sup>24</sup> Undoubtedly, the presence of these unopened letters begs a recollection of the unopened and unnoticed note that tried to forewarn Santiago of his death. Unlike that note which needed to be read in order to convey meaning, the significance of Angela's letters lies not in the signs and symbols contained on the page but in her persistent act of composing them: "[Bayardo] is gained over by the vigorous action of Angela's writing, and not by reasoning."<sup>25</sup> Suggesting that the past and future do not possess ultimate authority over human experience, Angela's decision to write affirms the agency of the present, which can impact the course of time with as much potency as the past and future. Thus, as the act of writing allows Angela to will her own past and future, the narrative does not only discredit the notion of predestination,

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Randolph D. Pope, "Transparency and Illusion in García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*," 197.

but maintains that time's spherical and interconnected nature does not necessitate its dominance over human experience.

Throughout Gabriel García Márquez's novel, the nature and function of time emerge as something that defies both the linear consciousness of human individuals and the factual expectations of the historical discipline which they have created. As the past and future impose upon the present state, time reveals itself to be more of a spherical entity which interacts in a way that defies the limitations created by the segmented chronicle. In this way, the narrator remains bound by the linear experience of his present state and the alterability of his memory, while time and truth operate in their own definitive yet unpredictable fashion. Furthermore, as death assigns meaning to the impositions from the past and future, the novel indicates that death functions at the intersection between the object of historical study and the nature of the method used to examine a moment in time. However, resisting the deterministic supposition that the individual is powerless against the dictates of time, the novel ultimately suggests that the agency of the present, seen through Angela's writing, allows the individual to alter the meaning assigned to the past and future.